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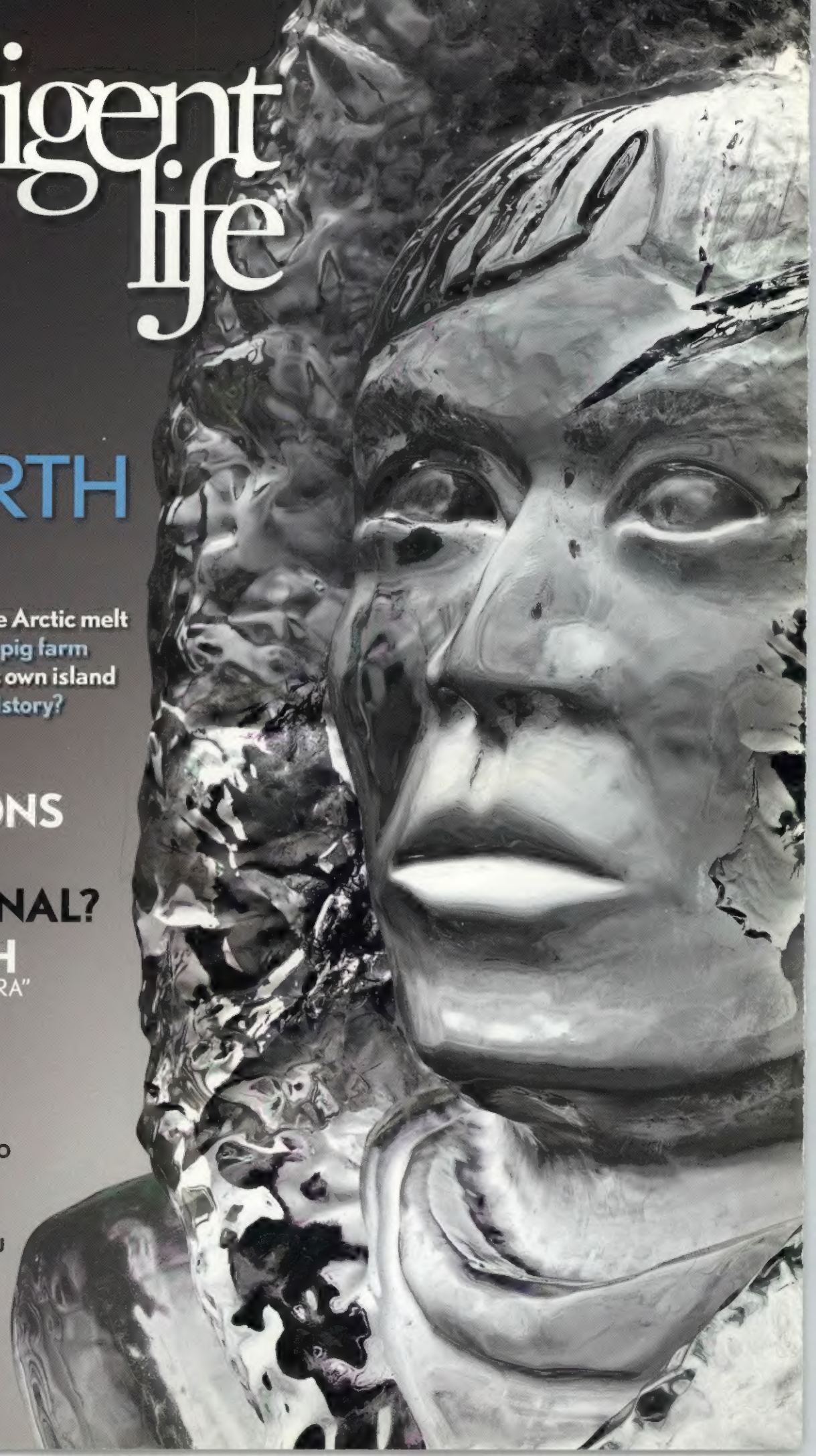

THE EARTH ISSUE

The people watching the Arctic melt
Turn your garden into a pig farm
The artist who made his own island
Is geography the new history?

THE SIMPSONS
VERSUS DISNEY

ARE WE TOO
PROFESSIONAL?

COLIN FIRTH
ON HIS "CAREER VIAGRA"

HOW TO BUY
CASHMERE

PLUS
SIMON HOPKINSON ON RISOTTO
SCORSESE'S GREATEST HITS
ANN WROE ON WORDSWORTH
BRIGHT YOUNG JEWELLERS
WILL SMITH ON LEARNING TO DJ
THE MEANING OF GOD

VOLUME 3 ISSUE 2
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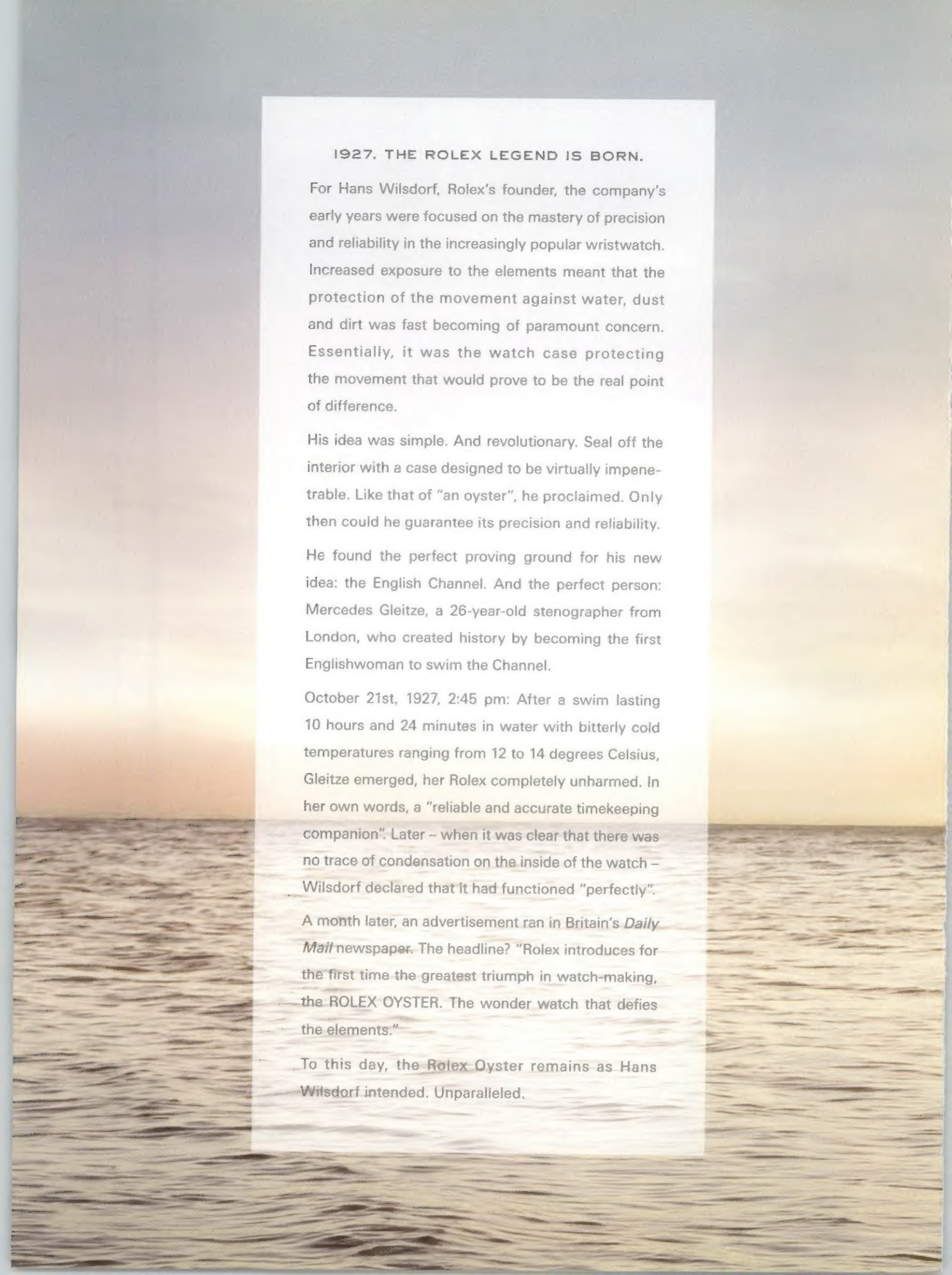

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He found the perfect proving ground for his new idea: the English Channel. And the perfect person: Mercedes Gleitze, a 26-year-old stenographer from London, who created history by becoming the first Englishwoman to swim the Channel.

October 21st, 1927, 2:45 pm: After a swim lasting 10 hours and 24 minutes in water with bitterly cold temperatures ranging from 12 to 14 degrees Celsius, Gleitze emerged, her Rolex completely unharmed. In her own words, a "reliable and accurate timekeeping companion". Later – when it was clear that there was no trace of condensation on the inside of the watch – Wilsdorf declared that it had functioned "perfectly".

A month later, an advertisement ran in Britain's *Daily Mail* newspaper. The headline? "Rolex introduces for the first time the greatest triumph in watch-making, the ROLEX OYSTER. The wonder watch that defies the elements."

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1927 The swimming of the English Channel.
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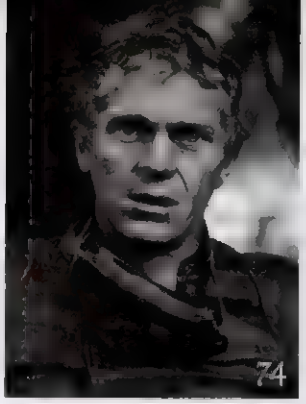

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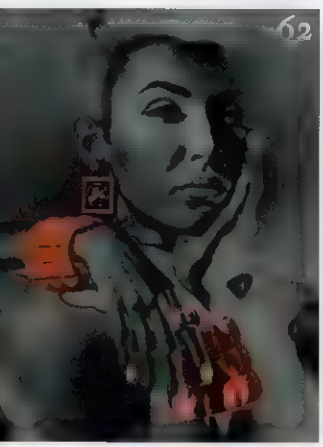

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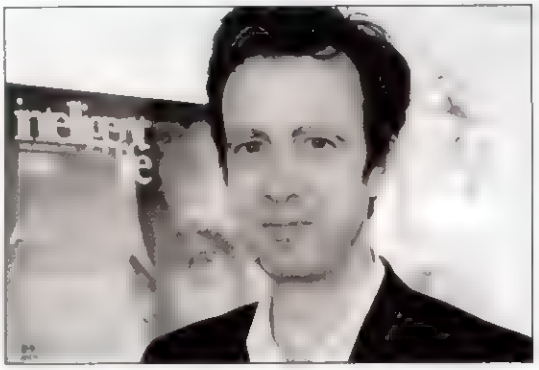
WELCOME TO OUR Earth issue, fronted by a melting iceman. This is the first themed issue we've done and it arrived organically. In June, with Copenhagen still in the middle distance, we decided to send a writer to **the Arctic** (page 84), to visit this sensational place in what may be one of its last icebound summers, to get past all the pontification and find out how climate change feels on the ground. The writer was Johann Hari, who recently went to Bangladesh for the *Independent* and wrote a memorable piece on the consequences of our carbon habit.

In July, Ann Wroe, the biographer of Shelley and writer of many sparkling *Economist* obituaries, agreed to join in our Authors on Museums series. She chose **Dove Cottage** (page 130), Wordsworth's home, and delivered an article drenched in the atmosphere of the Lake District. It acquired a contemporary twin when our contributing editor, Julie Kavanagh, suggested telling the story of **James Fenton's garden** (page 116). In August, another contributor announced that he was taking up **pig-keeping** (page 34). Our motoring writer tested **electric cars** in the country (page 58). The Quarter's Quarters slot went to hotels made of **natural materials** (page 153). And as This Season fell into place, it became even clearer that the Earth was in the air. The most promising film was "The Road", the most intriguing exhibition "Earth: Art of a changing world".

The rest of the magazine is eclectic as ever. We look at **the meaning of God** (page 50), **the Simpsons v Disney** (page 136), rising **jewellers** (page 62), great **cheeses** (page 42) and **Tasmanian nights** (page 146). We profile the actor **Colin Firth** (page 98) and the sculptor **El Anatsui** (page 142). The **photo essay** (page 106) comes home, for only the second time, with a fresh take on London.

The big talking-point is whether we have become **too professional** (page 122). The question is raised by Ed Smith, once a professional cricketer (and baseball player), now an established writer. He shows how sport has gone from needing to become more professional to needing



to reconnect with the amateur spirit, and how this syndrome also crops up in the wider world. Professionalism taken too far breeds jargon, unreality and introversion. Not that amateurism is better: you need both – the training and team ethos of the pro, the passion and perspective of the amateur. It's funny how today's sportsmen, who are mostly hyperprofessional, tend to become total amateurs if they move into the media. Ed Smith has just bucked that trend, joining the *Times* as a leader writer.

Our last talking-point was a feature on the twilight of the polymaths. It provoked a debate on the BBC's "Start the Week", a shoal of **letters** (page 19) and a blizzard of recommendations on Twitter – proving that a new medium, however succinct, doesn't have to be shallow. On our website, moreintelligentlife.com, polymaths had twice the traffic of any other article in the quarter. A decade ago, on another magazine, I sat in meetings where it was said that nobody would ever want to read more than 400 words online. This piece was 4,500 words. The web is more elastic than it is given credit for.

We have one new face this issue and, alas, two departures. Simon Hopkinson, the acclaimed author of "Roast Chicken and Other Stories", starts a relaxed cookery class in **Stove Notes** (page 46). Meanwhile Mary Fellowes, the first fashion editor in this company's long history, has joined Turkish *Vogue* as fashion director, and Andrew Marr, finally exhausted by his own versatility, has relinquished his column. So we have vacancies for a fashion editor and a history columnist. Not many magazines can say that.

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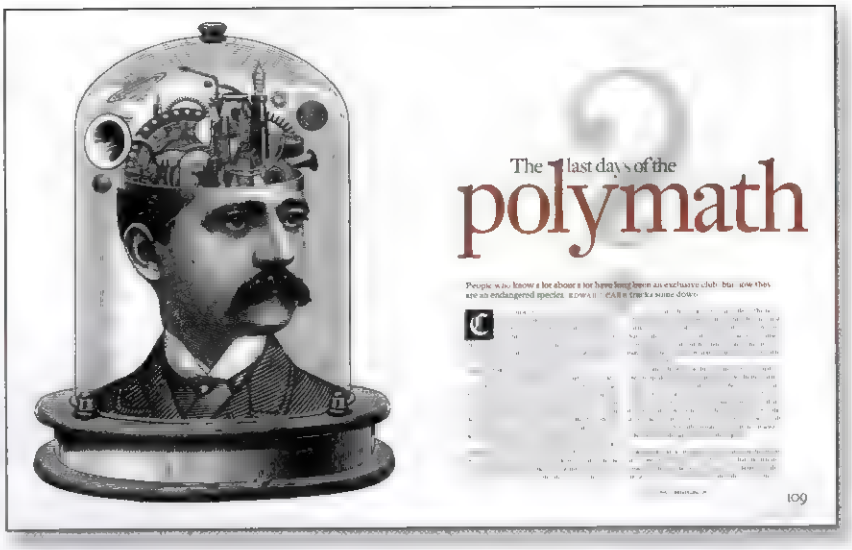

Polymaths: what, no women?

Re: The last days of the polymath? (Features, autumn)

I was amazed to see no women included at all in your list of living polymaths. None at all? You say "The nominations were wide-ranging, heavily male and entirely over 45." Understandable. But no women at all? I find this stunning and worthy of investigation in itself.

Michelle Malakouna

There are, indeed, female polymaths, even from times when female intellectuals were stigmatised: Hypatia of Alexandria, Hildegard of Bingen, Mary Somerville...All these women were defying society's expectations. The relative dearth of female polymaths historically is a reflection of the same social force that is killing polymaths off, male and female, today.

Michael Barnathan
Director, The Polymath Foundation
Morganville, New Jersey

Edward Carr failed to mention Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), the philosopher, logician, mathematician, pacifist and social critic. Although derided as a man who was "prepared to lay down the rules as to how the world should be governed but could scarcely brew himself a cup of tea," Russell ranks among the great intellects of the 20th century. How many scientists or mathematicians have won the Nobel prize for literature, as Russell did? I never really understood Einstein's theory of relativity until I read Russell's popular but masterly exposition in "The ABC of Relativity". His sparkling prose would put many a professor of English to shame. He taught many to think for themselves and show respect for mankind.

Gilbert Alabi Diche
Department of Geography, College of Education, Gindiri, Nigeria

I found Richard Posner's view that "applying a method to a new field is not the same thing as mastering multiple fields" unduly pessimistic. It is not impossible to achieve mastery in seemingly unrelated areas, as nanoscience and nanotechnology are showing. New avenues of understanding are opening up where physics, chemistry, engineering and medicine are not only converging, they are breaking down boundaries and reshaping our view of world. This could be the salvation of the polymath.

David
Surrey

The need for polymaths remains. The ability to integrate across fields of knowledge is akin to what happens when the brain oscillates within and across various lobes to create complex thoughts. It could be considered a higher function, as it mixes not only data but also emotional components. Studies have shown that diversity of outlook and experience produces better outcomes than panels of experts.

Mark Aspinwall
Thousand Oaks, California

I am inclined to think that monomathy and polymathy are complementary. Monomaths will continue to need polymaths to mediate them.

Ramesh Shukla

The problem with polymathy is that it doesn't pay well in the United States – you need to do one thing well, and maybe one other thing counts as a hobby, like Bill Gates playing bridge or Zero Mostel painting.

Richard LeComte,
Tuscaloosa, Alabama

You were a little stingy when assessing your list of living polymaths. Not only was Clive James – author of the exquisite "Unreliable Memoirs" – not deemed a top-class memoirist, but George Foreman was not considered a top-class "grill mogul". His grill is the most famous in the world and has sold over 100m units. What would he have to do to reach the front of his field?

Scott Jordan Harris
Rugby

Laws out of all proportion

Re: Taking liberties (Features, summer)

An excellent article. The failure of Britain's laws is the test of proportionality. Is this surveillance or invasion of privacy proportionate to the harm it seeks to avoid? A terrorist act – it passes. Litter – it fails. A mugging – it passes. Mass data collection for unknown future use – it fails. The problem is that a magistrate is not being asked to make such a test. Though the biggest abuse is surely the Control Order: we accuse you, you lose your liberty and we do not tell you why. "Not to worry if you have done nothing wrong." That's fine, so long as you are not falsely accused. So long as you trust every government to be.

Philip Sheppard
Brussels

To fly or not to fly?

Re: Green (Intelligence, summer)

If people are able to pay for a flight, then the market gives them the right to fly. However, if the price of the pollution created from that flight was calculated in the ticket price, then even better. It >

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> isn't a matter of the right to fly, as much as paying the right price.
MICHAEL MARTIN
OLETHA, TEXAS

The great thing about Metzger's "Reduce Art Flights" was that it pointed out the way that art had come to judge the ability to travel by air as a measure of success. That same ethos pervades the rest of society too, which is one reason it's so hard to abandon.
WILLIAM SHAW

Once upon a screen

Re: No passes? (Features, summer)
Brian Cathcart is perhaps too quick to dismiss the fears of the king in Plato's story about writing damaging memory. As Walter Ong argues in "Orality and Literacy", man has largely lost the ability to tell elaborate stories. Our modern reliance on text has eroded some elements of socialisation that oral cultures retain. While the web can be seen as a tool to offload cognitive functions, it is showing its power in supporting socialisation. Participation in recording as well as downloading knowledge is the key, and the younger generation seems to grasp this.
PAUL MATTHEWS
SENIOR LECTURER
BRISTOL INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Rewritable history

Re: Thinking (Intelligence, autumn)
A correction is merely one form of alteration to a published text, a beneficial one. But nothing guarantees that alterations will be beneficial. We used to mock the Soviets for making history fit their version of the truth – "trying to rewrite history" we called it. Electronic readers tethered to their sources are the perfect instruments for just that.
GARY HARRIS

Toronto has it all

Re: Being There – Toronto (Places, autumn)
The prices are American (ie, low). The taxes are French (ie, high). The health care is British (ie, decent). The women are Italian (ie, beautiful). The cops are Dutch (ie, live and let live). The politicians are Norwegian (ie, clean). The weather is Russian (ie, extreme). All in all, not too shabby.
NAME WITHHELD

Small world

I recently returned from Lviv, where my father was born. The Rodin museum had a life-changing effect when I studied in Paris. I've long harboured suspicions about It-bags. I argue with my husband, a windpower developer, about the miles he clocks flying around the world trying to save it. The debate over the gearbox rages in our driveway. I cannot kick my foodie habits just as my husband can't stop laying down wine. My sisters and I had turbulent relationships (and a shared boyfriend). Thanks to you, I no longer have the wretched feeling of being the odd one. I am living an Intelligent Life!
LESIA RUDAKEWYCH SCHOLEY
WEYBRIDGE

Where and when

I have been tremendously enjoying your magazine. However, too many articles are on British and United States topics. I would applaud this fantastic magazine if it were to embrace its global scope.
ERIK PIETERSE
HAARLEM, NETHERLANDS

Re: Andrew Turner (Letters, summer)
Monthly publication: definitely not. It's the only journal I read cover to cover: if it were monthly I wouldn't have time!
CHRISTOPHER SALE
ASCOT

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THIS SEASON

EXHIBITIONS

One man and his island

At the grand old age of 241, the Royal Academy is letting its hair down. After allowing itself to be spattered with red wax by Anish Kapoor, it now welcomes a gaggle of artists with a green tinge. For the second GSK Contemporary show, "Earth: Art of a changing world", Burlington House will have a giant molecular structure growing out of its venerable facade. The RA's new exhibitions director, Kathleen Soriano, gave us a sneak preview of the show, and as she flipped through her laminated folder, the images that lingered longest were these photographs by Antti Laitinen.

At first glance they are just gorgeous shots of the sea. On closer inspection there is an island, the kind you see in cartoons. Laitinen, who is Finnish, made the island himself, lugging sandbags out into the Baltic in a rowing boat for six weeks solid: a Sisyphus on sea. "Yes, it was like that," Laitinen says. "I think life is quite a Sisyphean struggle in general, but I don't consider it a bad thing at all."

The island didn't survive for long. Storms blew in, Laitinen made running repairs, but the weather won the battle. All that remains are these serenely intriguing pictures, only loosely related to climate change ("I don't like to underline anything"). They have been shown before, though not in a gallery this big. How do people react? "It seems that many people would like to have their own island." To a British viewer, John Donne comes inescapably to mind. "Yes, I know the line," Laitinen says, "and I think it is true. No man is an island, but man can try to build one himself." ~ TIM DE LISLE

Earth: Art of a changing world *Royal Academy, London, December 3rd to January 31st*

ANTTI LAITINEN, THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

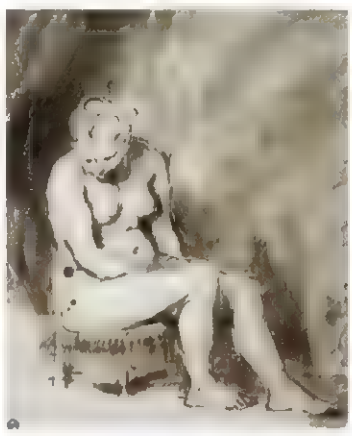
EXHIBITIONS AT A GLANCE

Decode: Digital Design Sensations (V&A, London, December 8th to April 11th). Data, mathematics, mechanics and all things geeky translate into exotic design and self-expression in an exciting show.

Drawings by Rembrandt and His Pupils: Telling the Difference (The Getty, Los Angeles, December 8th to February 28th). Thousands of drawings were created in Rembrandt's studio by both him (*below*) and his many students. How do we know which ones are his? This international loan show uses over 30 years of research to illustrate the distinction

Picasso and the Avant-Garde in Paris (Philadelphia Museum of Art, February 24th to April 25th). At a time when museum cost-cutting is curbing exhibitions, Picasso is always bankable. This show places him within Paris's vibrant modern art scene, with pieces from private collections and works by fellow avant-garde expatriates.

William Kentridge: Five Themes (MoMA, New York, February 24th to May 17th). What is amazing about this South African artist is not only his range (charcoal drawings, sculpture, prints, collage, opera design), but also his distinctive style. His dark, dreamy images are simple, evocative and very much his. ~ EMILY BOBROW



THEATRE AT A GLANCE

Arabian Nights (Courtyard, Stratford, December 5th to January 30th). Dominic Cooke revives his own adaptation from 1998. A stimulating alternative to panto or "War Horse".

The Misanthrope (Comedy, London, December 7th to March 13th). Damian Lewis has the air of a man disappointed in humanity and an underused talent for comedy, so he may outshine Keira Knightley in this updating of Molière.

Morecambe (Duchess, London, December 9th to January 17th) One-man show about Eric Morecambe, a critical hit at Edinburgh. Bob Golding (*below*) portrays a national treasure with astonishing acuity.

The Little Dog Laughed (Garrick, London, January 8th to April 10th). Tamsin Greig gets a gift of a part as a hard-boiled, smart-mouthed, long-suffering Hollywood agent in a Tony-winning comedy from 2006.

The Tempest (BAM, New York, February 14th to March 13th, then touring). The Bridge Project resumes with Stephen Dillane bringing his compacted intelligence to Prospero.

A View from the Bridge (Cort, New York, from December 28th). Arthur Miller's febrile family drama stars the luscious Scarlett Johansson in her Broadway debut. ~ IL

THEATRE

Soft features, sharp heart

There's something essentially childlike about Anna Maxwell Martin. It's partly to do with her squashy, button-nosed face, like a sketch from a Shirley Hughes picture book: she could be Alfie and Annie Rose's mischievous big sister. But it's more the straight-to-the-heart, transparent quality of her acting; she holds a character like a glass holds water, without anything as grown-up as thought getting in the way.

Her finest performances have all exploited this quality. The National's 2003 adaptation of Philip Pullman's "His Dark Materials" was hampered by unreliable machinery and moments of directing from drama A-level ("Let's show the Spectres are eating someone by flashing a spotlight on and off!"). Yet Martin was the subtle knife of the story – although she was 25 at the time, she sliced open a window into Lyra's 12-year-old world of directness, impishness and incipient womanhood.

In 2006, Maxwell Martin won a Bafta for her Esther Summerson in the BBC's "Bleak House", dodging the goody-two-shoes pitfalls of Dickens's orphan heroine by giving her a blunt innocence that seemed to be the product of honesty, rather than simple inexperience. And in 2009 she won again, for the defiant "N" in Channel 4's "Poppy Shakespeare", prancing and pranging her way round a psychiatric ward like a giant toddler in a tomato-coloured anorak.

Conversely, her Sally Bowles at the Lyric was, by some accounts, a disaster. She wasn't well during the production, and her voice wasn't to the critics' taste. But you suspect the real failure was in the casting: she just doesn't have the high-showbiz, tears-through-mascara tendencies needed for Sally's over-ripe sexual tragedy. Martin may be naughty, but she's not that naughty.

She is back on stage soon as Isabella in Michael Attenborough's production of "Measure for Measure". For the play to work, the audience needs to believe that Isabella is so overwhelmingly good that Angelo, a man "whose blood is very snow-broth", can be brought to sexual boiling point simply by her arguing with him about justice. Martin's explosive mix of innocence and energy should turn up the heat just fine. ~ ISABEL LLOYD

Measure for Measure *Almeida, London, February 12th to April 10th*

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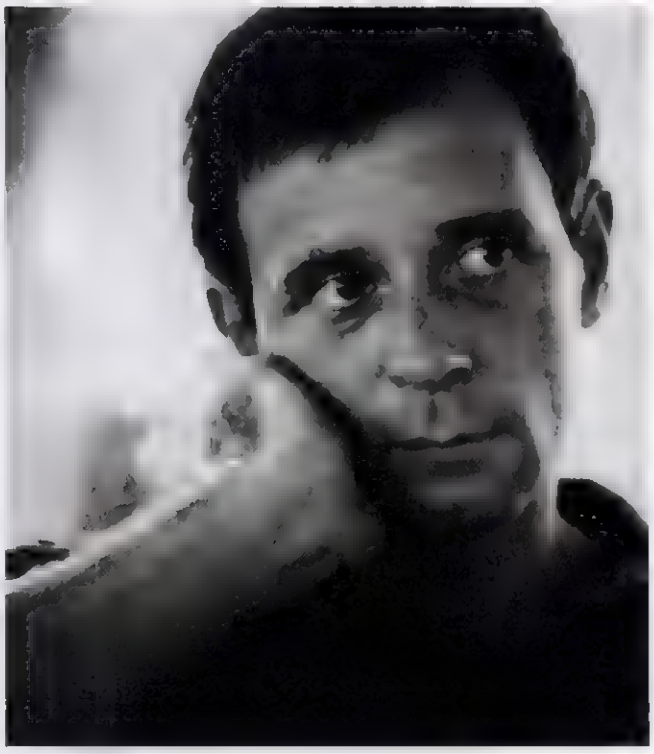
COMEDY

Worth every star

Edinburgh Festival-goers get used to coming across a lot of shows that are good, and very few that are top-class. This year, one show was streets ahead of the rest: "The Last Stand to Reason" by the Pajama Men, two men from Albuquerque who always perform in their pyjamas, possibly because they could make you laugh in their sleep. They received almost off-puttingly good reviews – five stars apiece from the *Times*, the *Guardian* and the *Telegraph*. I bought eight tickets for a group ranging from an impatient nine-year-old to some jaded forty-somethings, and then sat there wondering if the experience could possibly live up to all the praise. It did. The show was funnier than the funniest comedian, even though it slowly revealed itself as theatre rather than comedy – the breakneck sketches are all connected, forming a great tapestry of observational wit. Shenoah Allen is the one on the left with the rubber face; Mark Chavez is the one with the ruffle-worthy hair. Together they are electrifying. "We know each other so well," one of them says, "we sometimes finish one another's..." – "...Sandwiches," says the other. ~ TDL

The Last Stand to Reason *Soho Theatre, London, December 7th to January 9th*



BOOKS: NON-FICTION

A man's own story

Edmund White's trilogy of memoirs is the gay counterpart to John Updike's Rabbit novels. White was a late bloomer: the book that made his name, "A Boy's Own Story", arrived when he was 42. "City Boy", his third memoir, divulges his formative movements – a Midwesterner escaped to New York – in those two decades spent hunting for a voice. Arriving at the birth of the 1960s, he oddjobbed and hobnobbed while early plays failed and a first novel spent years in dry-dock, only to sink without trace. A second wasn't even published.

White had more success in his nightly prowls of the burgeoning gay underground, emerging as co-author of "The Joy of Gay Sex". The minutiae of cruising – all that who, what, how and, most of all, how often – now have a tint of sepia, but the Stonewall riots starring cop-baiting tranny warriors come up a treat. White decamps to Rome, then San Francisco, and tells of bitchy holidays in Paris and Venice, but the locus classicus of his tale remains lowdown, bankrupt New York. Its pained undercurrent is thwarted ambition, leavened by gossipy recollections of poets, queens and fossilised heiresses. A Proustian elegy for vanished times before the fall. ~ JASPER REES

City Boy *Bloomsbury, January*

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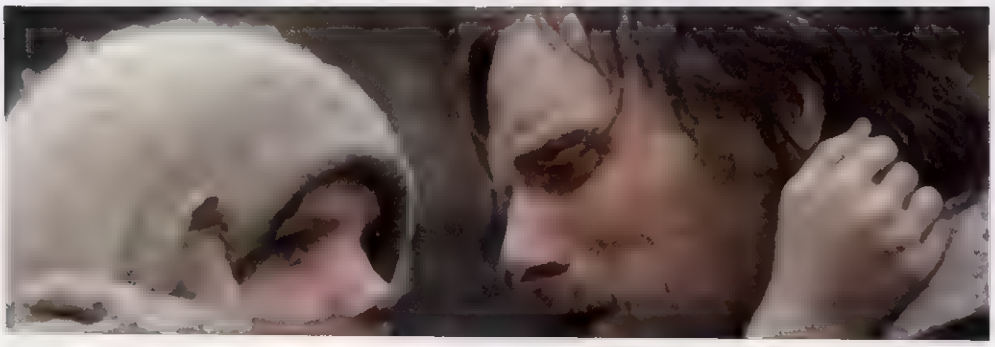
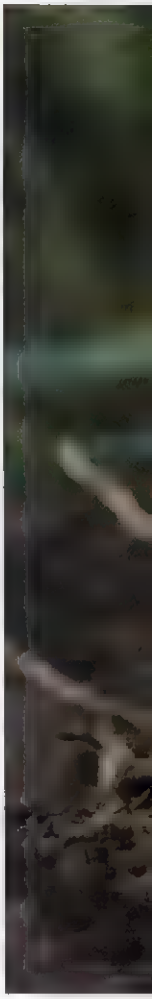


FILMS AT A GLANCE
Where the Wild Things Are (December 11th). Maurice Sendak's ten-sentence picture

THIS SEASON

INTELLIGENCE



HUSBANDRY

The Tamworth Four

Small-scale pig farming is on the rise. CHARLES NEVIN takes a course at Pig Paradise Farm and brings home the bacon

"SOME PIG." That was the pithy way the young porker Wilbur was described by his friend and mentor, Charlotte the spider, in E.B. White's classic children's book. I thought of it as I watched my pig, Henry, snoozing gently in the autumn sunshine, snout in the straw at the front of the sty, face betraying a drowsy pleasure remarkably similar to that seen in many a deckchair after a good lunch. As Lord Emsworth observes, contemplating the most famous pig in literature, The Empress of Blandings: "What a picture!"

These benign bucolic cameos stay with us, and they have surely played a part in a renaissance in small-scale pig-keeping. The British Pig Association reports a 30% increase in membership in a year. Other persuasive influences include the recession, the green virtues of waste avoidance and local produce, and, equally importantly, discerning foodieism. We small-pig people do not deal in anonymous, industrial pigs. Our pigs are rare pigs: Gloucester Old Spots, Middle Whites, Berkshires, Tamworths, the old English breeds swept aside by supermarket synergies. The money we make comes from the people whose mouths become moist at the merest mention of matters porcine.

In my case, it's money we hope to make. My family and I have a house in rural Somerset that we cannot keep in the manner to which it should be accus-

former sales director and mustard-keen swineaste, and his partner Carron McCann, a charming former headteacher. There were almost 20 of us, mostly married couples, and eclectic proof of the burgeoning movement: care-home owners, heating-systems engineers, an A-level examiner, a "Doctor Who" set designer, an IT consultant looking for a change, and almost the entire workforce of a small organic herbal skincare business (my wife, top end of the garden).

We were put through a packed programme, of which I remember most clearly: 1) Nothing quite prepares you for the violent volume of a pig's squeal. 2) They do this rather a lot. 3) Piglets do not like being lifted. 4) When feeding up weaners, it's "one for a loss, two to break even, three to make a profit." 5) Contrary to expectations, piglets smell like babies. 6) A pig's penis operates like a corkscrew, left-hand thread. 7) A pig's testicles are extremely large and have the consistency of a rubber ball. 8) If you tickle a pig under its foreleg, it goes into a trance and falls over. 9) Pigs can fly, if they get between their mother and the trough. 10) Watch your costs very closely. I don't remember why I was feeling a pig's testicles.

We decided to press on, quickly, eyes fixed on the Christmas market (the £118.25 per person for the course, pork lunch extra, vegetarian option available,

some of her herd were enjoying a sunny panorama, I was reminded of the well-fed pig voicing the old joke, "You know, there's got to be a catch in this."

This had been of some concern to us, callow ex-urbans that we are. Even Emma Bush, an experienced pig breeder and pork purveyor, looked pensive as she described how a pig, about to enter the truck for the slaughterhouse, will look back for reassurance. Piglets, Tony York had said, have an almost universal "aahh" factor. You are advised not to give them names.

My first thought, however, on being introduced to ours, was how on earth we were going to get them in the back of the car. Possibly taking Tony's advice on costs too far, we had decided against hiring a van. These four were three months old, not two, and well beyond the aahh stage. Judging by the tussle, just young enough, too, to be rolled through the hatchback two-by-two after Caroline had hoisted them by the back legs while I grabbed the front. A struggle, but worth it for the looks on fellow motorists' faces as the pigs stared out of the back window at them. Not to mention the expressions as we pulled up at an Indian restaurant to shut the back properly.

Once we were home, coaxing them to the bottom of the garden took on a flavour of those big-game hunts that often featured in Stewart Granger movies, with wary native beaters moving through dense undergrowth to the sound of loud drums. But eventually the pigs were fenced in, safe in their sty, or ark (now available at £349 from B&Q, or £180 when cannily, if not very aesthetically, constructed by us from a couple of pallets and some marine ply). The fencing, at £70, was another economy job, despite people tapping the side of their noses about Tamworths and recommending electrification (£140). Tony York also had a single strip of barbed wire laid along the ground at the bottom of the fence, but I thought that might be unpleasant for their snouts. Fool that I am. Under, over, through: all's the same to a Tamworth. Steve McQueen would have given one of his rueful smiles of peer recognition to these boys. On one occasion, the largest pig – Henry, after the Eighth – was using the smallest – Hucknall, squeals a lot – to climb over the fence. The derivation of "piggyback" is no longer a mystery.

The "aahh" factor
Charles Nevin with his piglets, headed by the grumpy, arbitrary Henry (*top*), named after Henry VIII

Luring them back became more and more difficult. They were, if you'll forgive me, absolute swine. Worries about the pain of separation and betrayal did not loom large. The final, pre-electrification break-out had the pigs hiding, completely silent, in the farthest reach of the garden. Tony York once came across some pigs similarly mute and stock-still: they were listening for the sound of a falling acorn. They do like their food. We give them organic pellets and windfalls to supplement their ruthless foraging. (Kitchen swill has been outlawed in Britain, and subsequently in Europe, since being blamed for the 2001 foot-and-mouth outbreak. The authorities require registration and movement notification for all pigs and enforce it with all the bureaucratic doubling-up and spot-checking that do so much for government-citizen relations.)

An Emsworthian calm, measured by the sound of rhythmic grunting and lip-smacking, has now returned to our garden, occasionally interrupted by a high-pitched, momentarily guilt-inducing yelp. And I have made some further observations: 1) All pigs are not equal. Henry rules Hucknall, Fred (after Barbarossa) and Churchill with a grumpy arbitrariness his namesake would recognise. 2) Pigs can bite. 3) You should never look a pig in the eye. Most unsettling. 4) Pigs will eat almost anything, but not St John's Wort. Clearly, depression is not a problem. 5) Pigs like having their photograph taken.

We have already sold six halves of pig (about 50lbs at £3 a lb); my wife is especially proud of the sale to the car salesman selling us a car. As I write, the day of execution is a little way off. As you read, it will have been done, and I shall be relieved.

Churchill (the statesman) said: "I like pigs. Dogs look up to us. Cats look down on us. Pigs treat us as equals." Mr Ernie Clothier, animal-feed merchant, puts it another way in his slow Somerset burr: "Having pigs is like meeting a strange woman. You're not sure where she's come from, and you're not sure where she's taking you to." Both are good, but don't completely capture this curious relationship. ■

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TIM ATKIN THE WINE-LIST INSPECTOR

THE LAUNDRY CLEANS UP

THOMAS KELLER HAS colonised Yountville in California the way Rick Stein took over Padstow in Cornwall. For Padstein read Kellerville. This small, beautiful, appealingly sleepy corner of the Napa Valley (population 2,916) is home to no fewer than four different Keller establishments: Bouchon, Bouchon Bakery, Ad Hoc and, most famous and expensive of all, the French Laundry. If Mr Keller didn't exist, Yountville would surely have invented him.

The French Laundry is one of America's most celebrated restaurants, with the plaudits, waiting list and three Michelin stars to prove it. The two-storey stone cottage on Washington Street has been a bar, a brothel, a private residence, a steam laundry and, more recently, a restaurant. Today it is widely acknowledged as the best place to eat "French" food on the west coast, or as my waiter put it, to have "a three-and-a-half-hour dining experience".

As a wine inspector, my job is to review the contents of the cellar rather than the cuisine. All I will say about Keller's cooking – and this is relevant to my criticisms of the wine list – is that it is some of the subtlest and most nuanced in America. The $240, nine-course tasting menu (there is no à la carte) is delicious: traditional, refined and beautifully cooked. There's so much emphasis on the food, right down to a bewildering choice of six different types of salt, that wine inevitably takes second place. That might sound unfair on a selection of 2,300 bins, which includes most of the world's finest names, 150 half-bottles and 44 wines by the glass. But it's true. The French Laundry attracts people who are foodies first and wine-lovers second.

Maybe that's why parts of the list feel as if they are aimed at label-fondlers. This is especially true of the Californian selection, which is full of over-priced cult wines. I'm sure there are people out there who are willing to pay $1,680 for a bottle of 2004 Harlan Estate or $2,050 for the 2004 Screaming Eagle, but they must be a dwindling band in the present economic climate.

Overall, the list is pretty pricey. Even in a three-star restaurant, it's worrying to find that the cheapest by-the-glass wine (a Sancerre rosé) sells for $16, and that the most expensive (Krug Grande Cuvée Champagne) will set you back $45. High mark-ups are a persistent problem, adding to the impression that wine sales are subsidising the food. To cite only one example, just two of the 360-plus Californian reds on the list cost less than $100, and many cost three or four times that amount.

Being situated in the middle of the Napa Valley is a boon. Commonly considered California's leading wine region, it attracts nearly as many tourists as Disneyland and supplies a consistent stream of punters to the French Laundry, not to mention local winemakers keen to impress their best customers. But there's a downside too. Napa Valley wines, particularly modern-style Napa Cabernets, don't generally work with Keller's food:

too big, too oaky, too obvious, too alcoholic. You can't blame him for listing so many, but make sure you don't order one.

There are, fortunately, more appropriate things to drink with the tasting menu, especially from Burgundy, an area the list specialises in. It's also gratifying to see a restaurant carry so many wines from Italy, Germany, Austria and Alsace, as well as a generous number of Californian Pinot Noirs. The two wines I drank, recommended by a friendly, knowledgeable sommelier, were the spicy, concentrated 2006 Bründlmayer Alte Reben Grüner Veltliner, Kamptal ($150) from Austria, and the stylish, elegant 2006 Anthill Farms Abbey-Harris Vineyard Pinot Noir ($160) from California's Anderson Valley. Not cheap, but great with the food.

If you ignore some of the prices, the by-the-glass selection is good too. Any restaurant that is prepared to offer its customers a German Riesling Kabinett, a traditional white Rioja, a Californian Roussanne, a Chinon, a Tokaji, a Sercial Madeira and a Brunello di Montalcino in small measures cannot be accused of parochialism or lack of nerve. It's also a joy to see so many excellent half-bottles.

Overall, however, the list is not as exciting or as focused as it could be. It's too long, relies too heavily on the Napa Valley, makes lazy, default choices in countries like Spain and Australia, and is not always selected to match Thomas Keller's cooking. There are also a few whites, especially from California, that sound worryingly mature to me. Is the 1989 Hanzell Chardonnay, for example, still in peak condition? I'm not sure, and at $565 a bottle I wasn't in a hurry to find out. ■

In the bin

Number of wines 2,300
By the glass 44
Under $50 3
Over $150 1,600
Best value 2005 Morgon, Marcel Lapierre ($50)
Worst value 1997 Screaming Eagle Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley ($10,075)
Gluggability ◆◆◆◆◆
Expense account adjuster* ◆◆◆◆◆
Sancerre index 3.5**

* Probability that the next-door table are paying with the company's money
** 2007 Sancerre, Les Monts Damnés, Chavignol, Pascal Cotat is $175 at the restaurant and sells for around $50 in the shops

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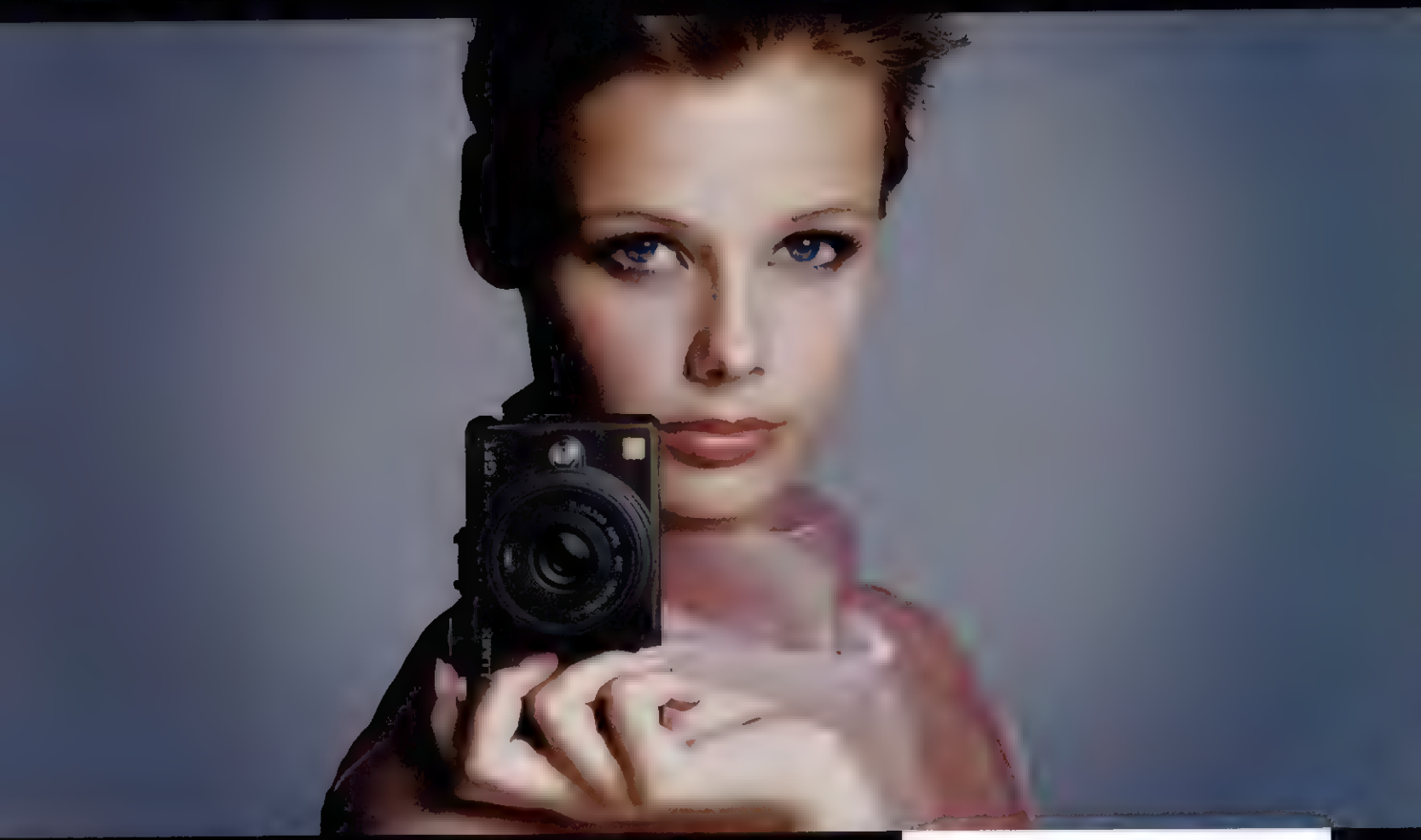

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FOOD

Cheese: a golden age

Is it possible to pinpoint the world's best cheese? CHRISTOPHER HIRST consults the experts and holds a week-long tasting

Sweeping the board Montgomery cheddar (*above*) earned top marks from the author and his one-woman tasting panel

FROM OOZY BRIE DE MIEUX to craggy chunks of parmesan, from the knee-weakening pong of limburger to the sweet sumptuousness of mascarpone, cheese has an almost limitless variety. Cheese shops and supermarkets offer a range of lactic treats that boggle the eye and bludgeon the nose. More types are within our grasp than ever before, battered wallets permitting. But which demands a place in the shopping basket?

In a wholly unscientific attempt to pinpoint the best cheese in the world, I collected samples of 30-odd nominations from chefs, food writers and cheese experts. The fragrant archipelago on our dining table made a convincing case that we are living in a golden age of handmade cheese, but a word of warning – these edible masterpieces don't come cheap. My wife returned from Neal's Yard Dairy in London with an initial haul of 21 British cheeses and a bill for £141.54. Once I'd recovered from the shock, I roped her in as tasting panel for a gruelling week of nibbling and ranking to find the top wedge.

For a classic rendition of stilton we went for Colston Bassett. I thought it was blue heaven – the sharp, clean flavour is softened by a slight mushroomy tinge – but the Tasting Panel was less taken: "It's an imposing cheese. You have to be on your best behaviour" (18 marks out of 20). Stichelton is a new stilton-type cheese but made with raw milk, not pasteurised. The result has great finesse and deep flavour, though hard-core stilton lovers may miss some sharpness. "A variant that anyone would like," insisted the TP. "Would it put people off if I said it was a girlie stilton?" (18).

A good-looking gorgonzola piccante from Gorgonzola in Lombardy was rich and satisfying within its knobbly rind (15) but the town's dolce was so buttery and bland as to be pointless (5). These impressions were reversed by gorgonzola from neighbouring Piedmont. The dolce was sweet and zingy, delivering addictive layers of flavour (16), but the piccante was hot, aggressive and soapy (4).

Two ewe's milk cheeses represented polar extremes. Swallet from Cumbria combines a wrinkled rind, camembert-style runniness and semi-solid core. Made only from spring to autumn, it tasted sweet, light and grassy. "I loved it," said the TP. "A real sense of summer milk." (19). Berkswell from Warwickshire is a hefty, hard cheese. Within its medieval rind, the flavour is resonant and complex with, oddly enough, a hint of coconut (18).

Try before you buy is a good rule with cheese, but this is a bit tricky with époisses, the semi-soft, marc-washed cheese from Burgundy, since it comes in a circular wooden box. Though it bore a gold medal, an époisses from leading maker Berthaut had been badly stored and for too long. "An evil-looking cheese," said the TP. "A glowing, red-orange – the colour of certain fungi." Worse still, it smelled of ammonia and tasted of cabbage (3). A second époisses, made by Gaugry, was spot-on: flowing, saline, deep-flavoured (17).

A trio of relatively new blue cheeses drew great applause. Made in Lincolnshire from unpasteurised cow's milk, Cote Hill Blue is a buttery, camembert-style cheese threaded with little blue veins. The rich

PHOTOGRAPH COLIN CRISFORD

flavour steadily grows on the palate and leaves a long aftertaste (16). Beenleigh Blue from Devon is a rarity in Britain: a blue ewe's milk cheese. Within a pink-apricot rind the cheese looks like an under-ripe roquefort, but the texture is drier and the flavour less salty. "Yum," said the TP, bestowing her highest term of praise. "Let's have another slice" (17). The granddaddy of the new blues is Cashel Blue (established 1984). Voted best Irish cheese at the 2009 World Cheese Awards, it is made on a farm in Tipperary. A clean, tempting smell precedes a range of rich sensations on the palate: woody, creamy, crumbly, salty. "Less in-your-face than stilton," declared my adviser. "An Irish charmer" (18).

With its orange rind and dense texture, Saint Giles from the High Weald Dairy in West Sussex won best British cheese at the 2009 awards. "It looks like St Paulin but it is miles better," cheered the TP. "A lovely buttery taste with hints of fruit" (19). This score was matched by a cheese from slightly farther afield. Pleasant Ridge Reserve made in Dodgeville, Wisconsin, exemplifies America's growing taste for characterful cheese. Its grainy texture delivers a fusillade of satisfyingly potent flavours. "A completely happy experience from first bite to aftertaste" (19).

Farm-made English hard cheeses were the group stars of the tasting. Kirkham's Lancashire was sharp and crumbly with a delicious lemon aftertaste (18). Keen's Cheddar, a mouth-filling, earthy classic (17), was outgunned by the full richness, complexity and prodigious aftertaste of Montgomery (19). Bearing comparison to these two classics was Lincolnshire Poacher. "Really whizzes round your head," said the TP (18). Wensleydale from the Hawes Creamery was appealing and moreish – a good nibbling cheese (16), but it was edged out by a farm-made wensleydale called Richard III. This Yorkshire monarch was drier, more matured and slightly sharper on the palate (17).

Though made in County Cork, St Gall delivered Gruyère-style texture allied to impressive flavours (19). Hints of hazelnuts and fruit kept us cutting slice after slice. Mimolette from French Flanders is a monster containing a marvel. Within an amazing orange rind pocked with craters like the surface of the moon, it delivered deep, concentrated flavours that rolled round the palate and left behind the longest of all aftertastes (18).

With five cheeses scoring 19 – St Gall, St Giles, Swallet, Pleasant Ridge, Montgomery – did any merit the extra mark? A final tasting of finalists confirmed they were all sensational. But on the grounds of irresistible raid-the-fridge allure, the laurels went to Montgomery: 20 out of 20. Congratulations. ■

A SELECT SELECTION

We asked 15 chefs, writers and specialists to pick their favourite cheeses. These are some of their thoughts

Giorgio Alessio
Chef at Lanterna, Scarborough
Gorgonzola from Piedmont is extremely soft, as a true gorgonzola should be. I use it for a sauce with beef fillet, or for pasta.

Neil Forbes
Chef at Atrium, Edinburgh
It doesn't get better than a hunk of Lanark Blue – a local sheep's cheese made in spring – with honey and crusty bread or oatcakes.

Paul Gayler
Chef at the Lanesborough Hotel, London
I love an époisses, the sort that likes to get out of the fridge on its own.

Rob Kaufelt
Murray's Cheese, New York
Burrata, a hollow ball of fresh mozzarella filled with creamy uncooked curds, is unsurpassed for voluptuousness.

Rowley Leigh
Chef at Le Café Anglais, London
I adore Kirkham's Lancashire acid bite and crumbly texture. There's no need to gild the lily, either – we serve it just with apple jelly and Carr's water biscuits

Tom Parker Bowles
Presenter of "Market Kitchen"
Montgomery's cheddar – it's a magnificent creation.

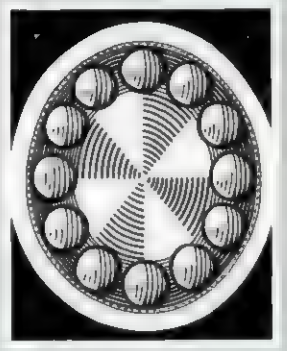
Patricia Wells
Author of "The Paris Cookbook"
Trois Cornes de Vendée: a fresh, firm raw goat's milk cheese from the Poitou. With a clean, lactic tang, it is smooth and unctuous.

REPASTS MEALS IN BOOKS

No9: ROUT CAKES

"Being an invalid, Joseph Sedley contented himself with a bottle of claret besides his Madeira at dinner, and he managed a couple of plates full of strawberries and cream, and 24 little rout-cakes that were lying neglected in a plate near him."

William Thackeray, "Vanity Fair" (1847)



Poor old, weak young Joseph. Enamoured of the nobility and acutely status-conscious, he earns his living as a petty colonial bureaucrat ("the collector of Boggley Wollah"). Returning to London after 30 years of service, he lodges near shabby Fitzroy Square. When Becky Sharp catches his eye, he responds boyishly: first by tricking her into eating a chilli, and then by stammering shyly ("the appearance of a lady", we hear earlier, "frightened him beyond measure"). He is fond of fine clothes, but fonder still of sleeping, drinking and eating; he manages all those rout cakes even in his weakened condition – something involving blue pills and liver complaints.

Rout cakes were sweet little pastries made for routs – lavish evening parties fashionable with early-Victorian aristocrats and aspirants: in "Emma", set in the same period, Mrs Elton turns up her nose at a "poor attempt at rout cakes". They are quite rich, calling for ample quantities of butter and eggs, though they are made of denser shortcrust, rather than flaky or puff pastry.

A rout cake's flavour comes from currants, brandy, sweet wine and something citrusy or floral, like orange-flower water. One 19th-century cookbook offers a variant based on "almond rout cake paste" – which seems a more pliable sort of marzipan, and is used in some wonderful, only-with-a-houseful-of-servants concoctions, including a recipe that shapes, dries and dyes the paste into carrot shapes, with "a slip of angelica to form the stem".

The rout cake has many descendants. Chorley cakes are currant-filled shortcrust pastries, with a rather puritan crust (no wine or oranges, no sugar). The Eccles cake also relies on currants, but has a puff-pastry base and a sugared top. Garibaldi biscuits are similar but thinner and longer. But rout cakes themselves have faded into obscurity, as podgy and forgettable as Sedley himself. Perhaps the combination was slightly off: the Eccles cake is better for sweet duties, the austere Chorley for cheese. Or perhaps the tarnish of Regency-era profligacy proved too hard to shake. – JON FASMAN

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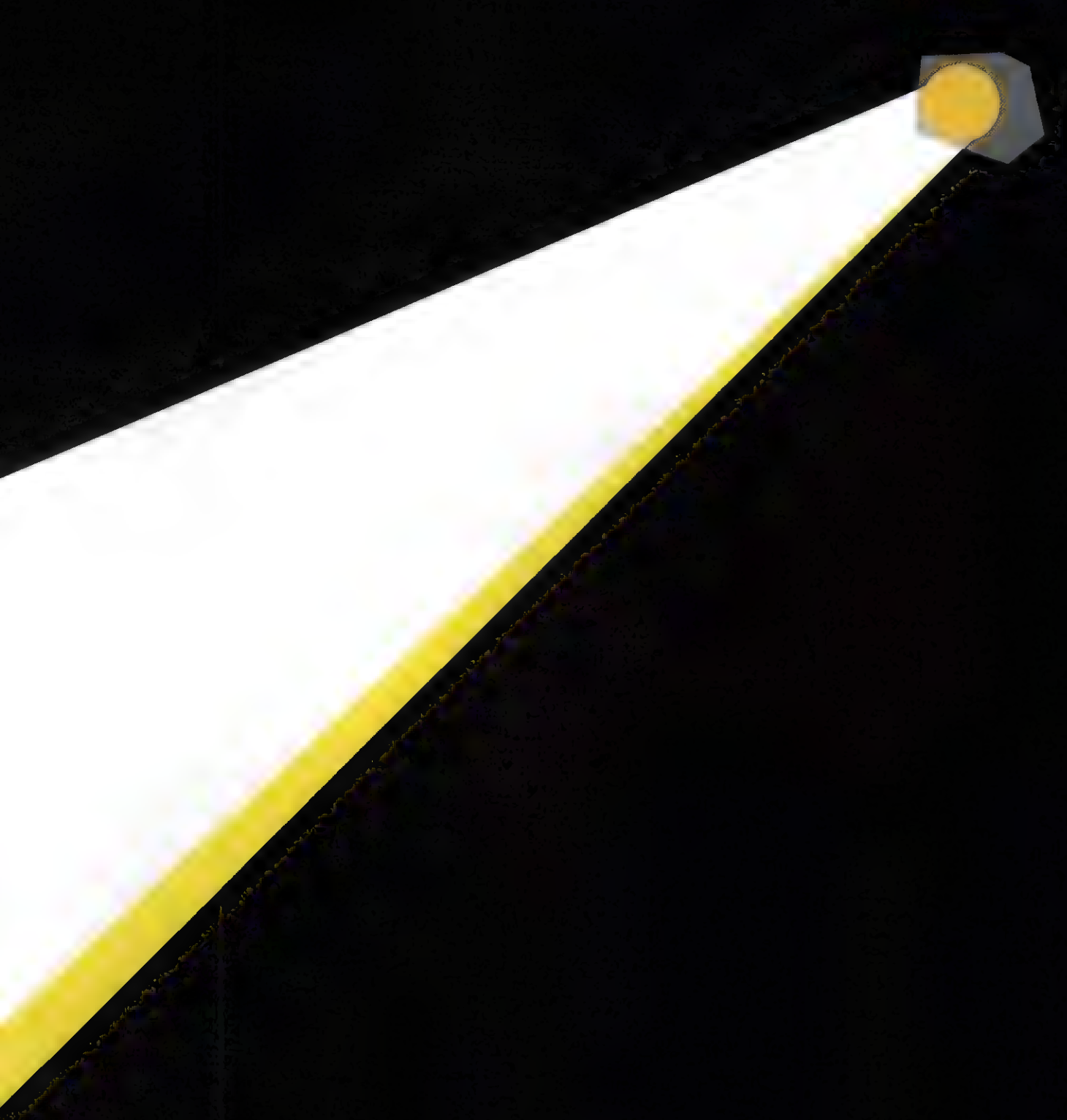

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FOOD: STOVE NOTES

Save the beat till last

In a new series, SIMON HOPKINSON goes beyond the received wisdom to give tips on well-loved dishes. First: risotto

On the island of Burano, in the Veneto, with its candy-coloured canal dwellings and endless lace vendors, there is a long-established trattoria called Da Romana. I've eaten there three times and, on each occasion, was served the finest risotto of my life. Always the same one, fashioned in exactly the same way and made using a fish that swims in the lagoon, known as *go*. It is an ugly little critter apparently, but makes a wonderfully tasty broth in which to cook the rice. None of the flesh of the fish is ever used; its flavour is merely donated to the cooking liquor, together with simple aromatics – celery, onion, a little garlic, bay and perhaps parsley stalks.

There are several reasons why this risotto is outstanding. It is fabulously white. It tastes delicately of fish, yet the quality of the rice – always the most important component – manages to be paramount. It is spooned out onto hot plates at table by a seasoned risotto-server, so that it quietly settles into a perfect circle of glistening grains. And as if to emphasise its *bianco* whiteness, each serving is speckled through with a few flecks of chopped parsley. About 27 of them, last time.

A risotto such as this, that so naturally coheres and seems so easy, takes time to master. When attempting my first restaurant risotto, in about 1983, I used the wrong type of rice – a pre-fluffed variety – and then cooked it through to a near-tenderness all in one go, in the oven. Then I finished it in an individual pan, adding more stock, butter and, heretically, cream. Twenty-six years on, several high-profile British chefs cooking in the French idiom now often add cream in the same ignorant fashion. Then again, French chefs have never understood risotto.

Yet, here is a paradox. In Paris there is a tiny restaurant in Le Marais called L'Osteria. Parisians adore it. Regulars fight for its 32 tightly arranged seats, so passionate are they about finding some of the finest Italian food in France. I ate there occasionally from the end of the 1990s until about 2006, and can confirm that Toni Vianello, at the time the owner and an astonishingly gifted chef, made a risotto second only to the numero uno of Burano.

Toni's risotto broke all the rules. He would cook the rice to a certain stage, without ever resorting to the usual constant-stirring-and-adding-the-broth-bit-by-bit. Tony, you see, insisted that it was the *mantecare* – a vigorous, final beating-in of butter – that was the essential part of risotto-making. The *mantecare* guaranteed an immaculate, homogenous mass of rice, broth, cheese (if appropriate) and butter. Skipping it, he said, was the reason why many risotti miserably fail, with the rice falling out of suspension and ending up surrounded by a pool of seeping broth.

Using Toni's controversial method for a *risotto ai bianco* – finely chopped white onion, rice, white wine, broth, butter, parmesan – to feed two, I would suggest a ratio of about 160-170g of rice to 500ml well-seasoned chicken broth. Both his version and mine involve first frying a chopped onion in a good knob of butter using a straight-sided, solid pot until soft, then adding the rice and stirring it around until well coated and shiny with fat. Then a glass of white wine is added, the heat turned up and the pot stirred constantly until the wine both reduces and is absorbed by the rice.

Then all the broth is added to the rice in one go, brought to a simmer, covered and baked in a moderate oven for 15-20 minutes or until the rice is just tender. Remove the lid and, using a sturdy wooden spoon, stir in two thick slices of softened butter and two heaped tablespoons of grated parmesan. Cover for a couple of minutes before beating everything together like merry hell, until the entire risotto resembles a shining, sloppy mass. Serve on hot plates, not silly, over-sized soup bowls. Hand round extra parmesan at table. ■

Shopping list

Onions White-skinned onions will disappear into the rice and, generally, also have a sweeter taste. Waitrose often stocks these, particularly in summer.

Rice Riso Gallo carnaroli rice is a good choice – it always behaves well and is widely available.

Fish stock To (almost) replicate the *go* risotto, try a carefully made fish stock (using sole bones, say) or use mussel juice. Most supermarkets stock bags of mussels, but you should really only buy them when there is an "r" in the month.

Cheese Grana padano is an excellent, simpler and more affordable alternative to parmesan that's nearly always on offer in good Italian delis and some supermarkets.

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HISTORY

The beginning of the story

If news, as a commodity purveyed by reporters, is coming to an end, when and how did it start? BRIAN CATHCART finds out

In 1844 the London *Times* despatched its great reporter W.H. Russell, then still making his name, to Dublin to report on the trial for sedition of the Irish leader Daniel O'Connell. It was a sensational case and the paper was eager to be first with the news, so Russell did his best.

By good fortune he was the only reporter on hand when the jury returned unexpectedly with its verdict. From the courthouse he rushed by carriage to the ferry harbour, where the *Times* had a steamship ready. This whisked him across the Irish Sea to north Wales, where, with his rivals still nowhere to be seen, he boarded the train to London. Arriving breathless at the *Times* offices, he was greeted by a man in shirtsleeves he took to be a printer, who exclaimed: "So glad to see you safe over, sir! So they've found him guilty?" Russell, flushed with pride in his scoop, replied: "Yes, guilty, my friend."

Alas, he was addressing an artfully disguised representative of the rival *Morning Herald*, which merrily printed the verdict next day.

Journalists have long delighted in such stories. Often recounted, like the tales of Agincourt, with advantages, they present the reporter as a roguish knight-errant, a dashing adventurer with a streak of rat-like cunning. The stuff of countless Fleet Street memoirs, they are also the essence of the Watergate story and of newsroom dramas such as "The Front Page". Today, however, such derring-do is rare, not just because telephones and live television make it unnecessary to rely on steamships and trains, but because the whole idea of news as a commodity owned and purveyed by journalists is slipping into history.

Consider Russell's tale. As he rushed from carriage to ship to train he had that simple item of information to himself. When he reached London he was still the only man there to know it, and in his mind was the joyous prospect that the rest of the country would discover it only if they read his report in the next day's *Times*.

Now consider the modern experience. Yes, for a brief moment reporters still own a big courtroom verdict, but it is very brief – no longer than it takes to rush out to the street and say the words to a television camera. Indeed, it can be even quicker: I have seen a reporter surreptitiously texting a verdict from a courtroom while the judge was still speaking. And this fleeting ownership is possible only because British courtrooms, unusually, are still un-televised.

A dashing adventurer
W.H. Russell, the first war reporter, in a *Punch* cartoon of 1855

Most modern news – in the sense of fresh facts – travels across the television airwaves and the internet with little intervention by journalists, so the reporter's job is no longer about the breathless conveyance of such facts à la Russell, but about repackaging and interpreting information the audience has probably already heard. There are still scoops, but they tend to be either bought off the peg (like the *Daily Telegraph*'s series about MPs' expenses) or the result of lengthy and expensive investigation. To own fresh facts today, you need to spend money.

Does this matter? It depends whom you trust. The change leaves the people who originate most news – governments, corporations, police, celebrity PRs – better placed to manage its release, to elbow aside the reporter and communicate with the public on their own terms. They get to write the first draft of history, and if anybody owns the news now, it is them.

There is another question: if news as Russell knew it, and as the last reporters in Fleet Street in the 1980s understood it, is now dying, when was it born? The answer is that it was a child of technology, achieving meaningful existence after the arrival of steam-powered printing presses about two centuries ago.

The hand-operated, Gutenberg-style machines in use before that didn't have the power to reach large numbers of people quickly enough to be instruments of news. They carried some fresh facts, but editors knew that their technology was usually too slow to compete even with word of mouth, so they gave priority to commentary. The early *Times*, for example (it was launched in 1785), or William Cobbett's famous *Political Register*, was primarily a vehicle of opinion: they tended to make just the same tacit assumption you now find in today's daily papers – that the reader already knows the facts.

Another piece of historical symmetry here is that the first steam press was introduced at the *Times* in 1814 in an overnight coup designed to prevent sabotage by the old-style printers. It took a remarkably similar coup in 1986 – when Rupert Murdoch suddenly moved the *Times* to new premises in Wapping – to introduce computer production to British national newspapers. This was one of the developments that would eventually kill old-style news. Technology giveth, and technology taketh away. ■

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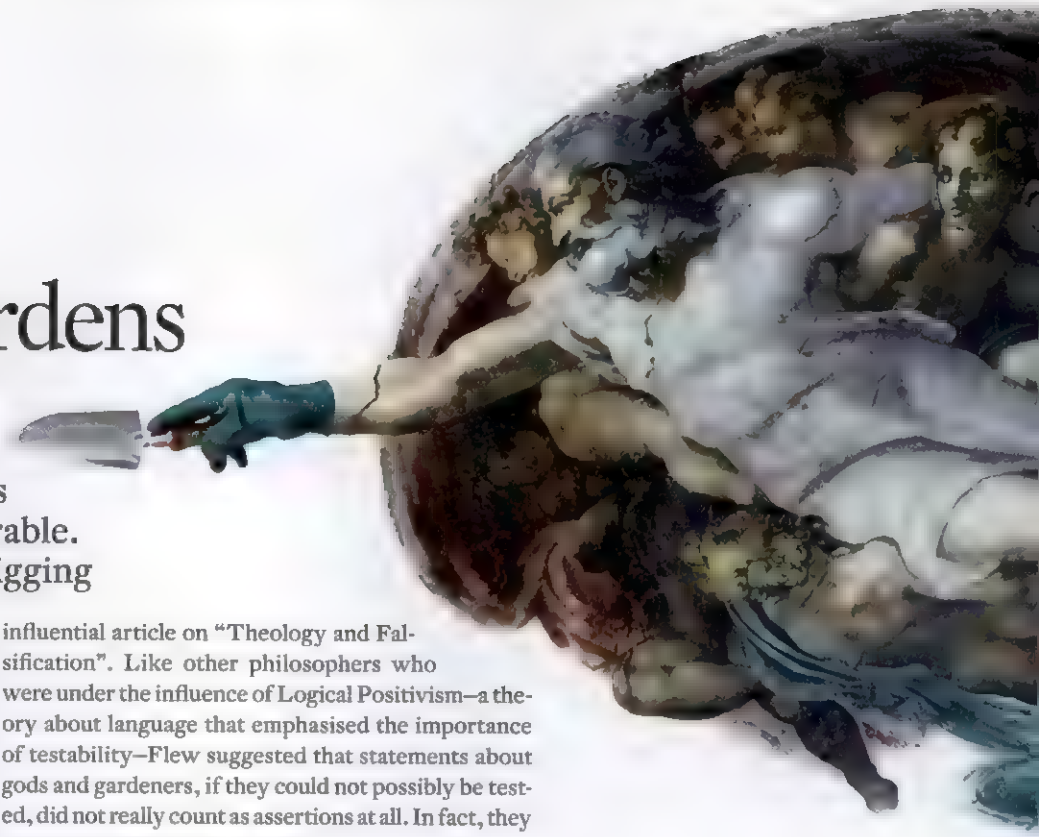
THINKING

Of God and gardens



Believers have got into a tangle trying to fend off the likes of Richard Dawkins. And then there's the problem of the horticultural parable. ANTHONY GOTTLIEB does some digging

In 1944 John Wisdom, an aptly named British philosopher, wrote a parable about a garden. It took up just a few paragraphs of an intricate essay in a professional journal, but it seeded a controversy that ran for a good few years before subsiding into the mulch of abandoned philosophical debates. The essay was about religion: the parable raised the question of what meaning, if any, could be given to the idea that the world is watched over by a loving God. Sixty-five years later, Wisdom's tale is ripe for retelling because religious apologists have argued themselves into a frightful muddle. A slew of books aimed at rebutting the so-called "New Atheists"– Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris – has unintentionally given new life to an old controversy about the meaningfulness of statements about God.

The parable went like this. "Two people return to their long neglected garden and find, among the weeds, that a few of the old plants are surprisingly vigorous. One says to the other, 'It must be that a gardener has been coming and doing something about these weeds.' The other disagrees...They pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. The believer wonders if there is an invisible gardener, so they patrol with bloodhounds but the bloodhounds never give a cry. Yet the believer...insists that the gardener is invisible, has no scent and gives no sound. The sceptic doesn't agree, and asks how a so-called invisible, intangible, elusive gardener differs from an imaginary gardener, or even no gardener at all."

It seems that no evidence could make the man who believes in a gardener concede that he was wrong. Come what may, he will hang on to his faith in a guiding hand with green fingers. Wisdom hinted that this dispute seems not to be one about what it is reasonable or correct to believe, but is instead more like a difference in attitudes towards the garden.

By elaborating on Wisdom's parable, several philosophers of the 1940s and 1950s challenged religious believers to explain what they were up to. "What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or of the existence of, God?" asked Antony Flew, a British sceptic, in an influential article on "Theology and Falsification". Like other philosophers who were under the influence of Logical Positivism–a theory about language that emphasised the importance of testability–Flew suggested that statements about gods and gardeners, if they could not possibly be tested, did not really count as assertions at all. In fact, they were pretty much meaningless.

Logical Positivism went too far: its conception of language was too narrow, and the charge of meaninglessness could not plausibly be made to stick. But the parable of the gardener did raise an unsettlingly powerful point about the nature of faith. If you believe something, shouldn't it be possible to say what would make that belief true or false? What is the content of your so-called belief in the existence of a God, or of a gardener, if you cannot say what difference his presence or absence would make to the world?

Fundamentalist believers, and many others among the faithful, are not troubled by such questions because they know exactly what they are claiming. They maintain that a supreme being made the world, which bears the signs of his handiwork, and that they therefore have concrete evidence, or even decisive proof, of the existence of God. (According to their official catechism, Catholics are supposed to believe that the existence of God can be deduced from the order and beauty of the world, and from the existence of man's sense of morality.) But in writings such as Richard Dawkins's "The God Delusion" (2006), the New Atheists have undermined the idea that the state of the world points compellingly to the existence of a God. Like the sceptic in the parable, they are unimpressed with the alleged evidence of an invisible divine gardener, and reckon that evolution and cosmology can explain the wonders of nature instead. In reply, religious thinkers have launched a counter-attack in which they claim that the New Atheists, in their wilful ignorance of theology, are attacking an old-fashioned God whom few people believe in anyway. And that is where the trouble starts, because these believers now seem to have painted themselves into a corner.

Consider, for example, "The Case for God", the

If you believe something, shouldn't it be possible to say what would make that belief true or false?

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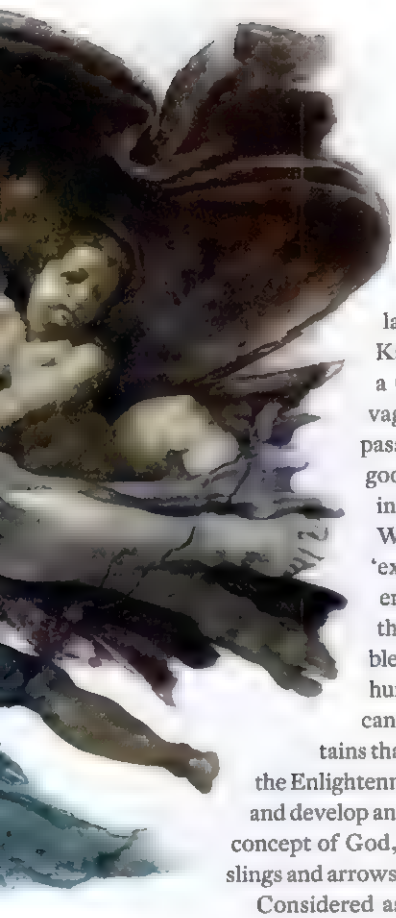

latest of 22 books on religion by Karen Armstrong, who was once a Catholic nun but now espouses a vague, universalist religion of compassion. In her opinion, God "is not good, divine, powerful or intelligent in any way that we can understand. We could not even say that God 'exists', because our concept of existence is too limited." Her main idea is that the only authentic and defensible God is one who utterly transcends human understanding and therefore cannot be described at all. She maintains that religion took a wrong turn during the Enlightenment when it tried to imitate science and develop an articulate and rationally defensible concept of God, thereby leaving itself open to the slings and arrows of the atheists.

Considered as history, Armstrong's account is puzzlingly eccentric, since many of the greatest religious thinkers before the Enlightenment–such as St Thomas Aquinas–took great pains to spell out their conception of God and to offer proofs of his existence. What is even more baffling is the idea that one can talk about a wholly indescribable God who cannot be said to "exist" but who nevertheless in some sense "is". By definition, atheists say that God does not exist. So what, according to Karen Armstrong, does the difference between an atheist and a believer amount to? We seem to be back in the thickets of Wisdom's garden–only now the gardener is so far beyond our allegedly limited "concept of existence" that we cannot even say that he is there.

Simon Blackburn, a British philosopher, remarked that Armstrong's attitude to religion is reminiscent of Alice after hearing the nonsense poem "Jabberwocky": "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas – only I don't exactly know what they are." Armstrong is far from alone among believers in retreating to the haven of incoherence. One trenchant critic of the New Atheists is Terry Eagleton, a leading literary critic (and Catholic), who defines God as "what sustains all things in being by his love, and...is the reason why there is something instead of nothing, the condition of possibility of any entity whatsoever." Some find it comforting or inspiring to utter such statements. But unless they can explain what those ideas mean and how one might tell whether they are right (which Eagleton never does), this is a self-deluding comfort. A wiser response to the apparent inexpressibility of statements about God may be simply not to express them, and just get on with the gardening. ■

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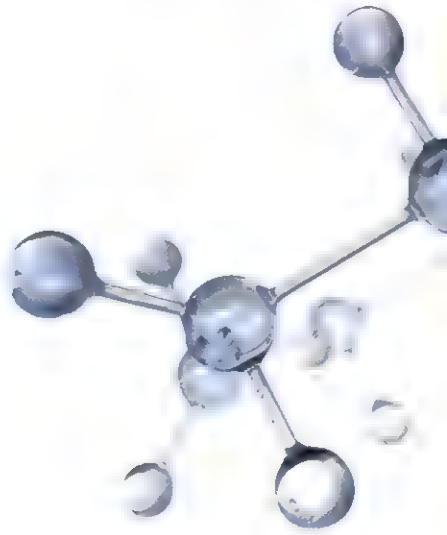

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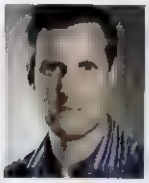

ED SMITH ON SPORT

USAIN WRECKED MY THEORY

IT IS ALWAYS painful to be parted from a pet theory. In my case, I have Usain Bolt to blame.

The theory was simple: we have stopped getting faster. More accurately, the rate at which we are improving has slowed significantly. Instead of smashing records, we are shaving fractions off them. Male marathon runners have improved the world record by about five minutes over the last 40 years. In the previous 40 years, they lopped off 20 minutes. Since the 1970s, a similar levelling-off has happened in both men's and women's middle-distance running. We are inching forward rather than taking giant leaps. So I have been arguing that sport is approaching the outer limits of human potential: we would have to get used to slowing down at the business of getting faster.

I could count on the support of greyhounds and racehorses. Despite vastly expensive and sophisticated breeding and training methods – not to mention burgeoning economic incentives – modern trainers cannot squeeze much extra speed out of their thoroughbreds. For greyhounds, there has been little improvement in the winning times of the English Oaks since 1966. The English Grand National and the English Derby plateaued in about 1971. Greyhounds just aren't getting faster.

Nor are horses. The Derby is Britain's leading flat race. This year's winner, Sea the Stars, has been hailed as the greatest racehorse of all time, but his winning time of 2 minutes 36 seconds wouldn't have beaten 1953's winner, Pinza. Perhaps the ground was faster in 1953. But that wouldn't explain why there has been virtually no improvement in the average winning time over the past 50 years – it has almost always bobbed about between 2.34 and 2.40. The Kentucky Derby tells the same story: between 1949 and 2008 there is no significant correlation between year and winning speed. Why? According to the Harvard evolutionary biologist Andrew Berry, "You can only breed horses with ultra-light thin bones to a certain point; the bones will break under stress if they get any lighter." Horses have hit their outer wall.

In many respects, so have humans. The increase in human height, for example, has begun to level off. And if you draw a graph of athletics world-record times, the curve appears to be turning into a plateau. I assumed we were going the same way as greyhounds and racehorses.

Then came Bolt. Initially, I stuck to my guns. At the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, Bolt won gold in both the 100 metres (*pictured*) and the 200. He reduced one record from 9.72 to 9.69 and the other from 19.32 to 19.30. While the press hailed him as a freak of nature – a 6ft 5ins breed of super-human – I hid behind the reassurances of science. Mark Denney's research at Stanford argued that Bolt had not really shattered the records at all. He had only shaved 0.3% and 0.1% off them. Denney predicted that one day human beings might be able to run 100 metres as fast as 9.48 seconds. But that would be the limit. My theory was clinging on.

Denney's research gave humanity as much time as we liked to get down to 9.48. But Usain Bolt nearly got there in one year. At the Berlin World Championships in August 2009, Bolt ran 9.58. You could say he shocked the world. But no one was any longer capable of being shocked by Bolt. At the Olympics, Bolt had cruised the last 20 metres, as though it was more important to look cool than to break records. At Berlin, Bolt stayed serious for the full nine and a half seconds. But he did allow himself a glance or two at his closest rival Tyson Gay, and then at the electronic clock by the finish line. By avoiding those distractions, Bolt could have run even faster. It was time to wave the white flag and say goodbye to my theory.

Tyson Gay must feel the same. Gay ran in lane five at Berlin, one outside Bolt. If you watch the slow-motion replays of the race head-on, Gay's performance is almost more fascinating than Bolt's. Most losing runners lose their form. As they struggle to stay in touch with the winner, they make technical mistakes. Yet Gay seemed to run perfectly throughout the race. In fact, his 9.71 is the third-fastest legitimate time in history. And yet he wasn't even in contention. That is how good Usain Bolt is already.

Bolt claims he can run 9.4. Before Berlin, I would have reached for my graphs and queried his arrogance. I would have argued that the projection shows us x, history demonstrates y, and that the outer limit looms at z. Now I'd rather just look forward to the next instalment of human genius. Bolt isn't done yet – and neither are we. ■

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CARS

Charging across country

Can electric cars cope with rural conditions? PAUL MARKILLIE finds out

DARKNESS IS UPON us, so the headlights are on. That will only make matters worse because we still have some way to go. Who do I know in the next village? Jake's a green and I'm sure he wouldn't mind letting me use an electric socket for an hour or two. That should be long enough to top up the battery for an assault on the hill towards home. Perhaps we can reach the pub? I make a mental note to put an extension lead in the boot – one long enough to reach the car park from the bar.

It will be touch and go. The dial on top of the dashboard is mesmerising. The needle is well into the red now and will soon drop below 10%. My fault, because I failed to charge up fully before we left. But we are still going. We pass Jake's place and then the pub. We are now on a single-track lane, but at least there are no lights coming. So I go for it: floor the accelerator and take the hill. Amazingly we hit 50mph. Only a few hundred yards now and up the drive, stop and plug a power lead into the socket fitted in the hole where petrol would normally go. The secret of life with an electric car is perfect planning.

A number of new electric cars will be launched over the next few years. Many will be hybrids of various sorts, but among them are cars that will rely only on their battery. With incentives like zero road tax, freedom from tolls such as the London congestion charge and perhaps even subsidies, all-electric vehicles could make a lot of sense in cities, where average speeds are slow and most journeys short. But what about getting their tyres dirty in the countryside?

You would think that rural electric motoring has a lot going for it. Out in the sticks people are more likely to have a drive or a garage available for an overnight charge. And with scant public transport most households tend to have more than one car, so the electric one could serve as a short-range runabout. But there are drawbacks, which soon become apparent during

ILLUSTRATION NICK HARDCASTLE

the downpour that greets the arrival of an electric Smart Fortwo (on a trailer because it lacks the range to reach rural Hampshire from Milton Keynes). The lanes in these parts turn into rivers when it pours. The Land Rover just ploughs through, but the Smart is small, and water and electricity don't mix. I am particularly concerned about the big battery under the floor. But to survive in the countryside any car must cope with chores like an eight-mile (13km) round trip to a convenience store, come rain, wind or shine.

It is strange turning the ignition key to be greeted by silence, but pressing the accelerator sends us zooming off. The Smart is surprisingly nippy. One of the great attributes of an electric motor is that it delivers torque almost instantly. Which is why there is no need for a gearbox. The Smart has all the safety features of a real car, including air bags and anti-lock brakes, plus a heater, a fan, lights and windscreen-wipers—all of which go on as the interior steams up and we pick our way through the shallows.

The journey is completed without a glitch, although it has relieved the battery of about 10% of its capacity. The next morning, after an overnight charge, it is back to full. All other trips proceed much like driving a small petrol car, except that fast main roads also sap the battery. This is why the electric Smart is electronically limited to 60mph.

I estimate it cost about £1 to recharge overnight. Daimler, which owns Smart, reckons it can go for 70 miles on a charge, but I would be more comfortable with about 50 miles and plenty of reserve. As most small cars will now do more than 50 miles on a gallon of petrol, the Smart could in theory go four or five times farther for the same money—just not in one go.

The total cost of ownership is less clear because the big manufacturers have yet to launch and price their all-electric cars. My Smart was a test vehicle. The final version, soon to go into production, will have a more efficient battery and will initially be leased to companies. Sales to individuals are due to begin in 2012.

As a rule of thumb, expect the initial outlay on an all-electric car to be twice that of its petrol equivalent, because the batteries are expensive. Subsidies could reduce prices, but drivers wanting longer range or better performance will have to pay more for extra-powerful batteries. Some carmakers will sell or lease batteries separately. Only when electric cars take to the road in increasing numbers will it be possible to compare costs and performance properly. Still, as the prototype Smart showed, the sums just might add up to use one in the countryside—provided you remember to plug your vehicle in. ■

ALL-ELECTRIC OPTIONS

Smart Fortwo ED
Up to 115km and 0-60kph in 6.5 seconds. Due 2012

Renault Fluence
Five-seater saloon with a 160km range. Due 2011

Tesla Roadster
Ferrari rival with a supercar price-tag: £94,000

Mitsubishi iMieV
A four-seater 160km-range city car. Due 2010

Trabant nT
Born again in electric form, if its German backers can raise enough cash

GAMING TOM STAFFORD
GROUNDHOG DAY

If I could turn back time...It's a dodgy Cher song, with a video that features a battleship. It's also a very natural wish. Who has not longed for the ability to press rewind, after blurting out something that should have remained unsaid, or reversing into another car outside the supermarket? Alas, real life does not have a rewind button. But a growing number of video games do.

The idea goes back at least as far as "Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time", released in 2003. The prince was armed with a special dagger that could rewind time by as much as ten seconds – very handy if you have just fallen off a crumbling ledge or been dealt a devastating blow during combat. Killing bad guys recharged the dagger's time-travelling powers.

Time travel is central to "Braid", a gem of a game originally written for the Xbox 360 that is now also available on Mac and Windows (and, as a download, on PlayStation 3). At first glance it looks like a Mario-style platform game, albeit with a distinctive graphical style and a rewind button that puts the on-screen action into reverse. If you miss a jump or fall off a cliff, you can rewind as far as you like and have another go. But things get really clever with the introduction of doors, switches and other things that are unaffected by the rewind button. All sorts of mind-bending time-travel puzzles become possible.

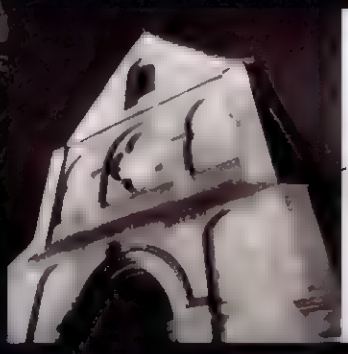
It is in driving games that the ability to turn back time really comes into its own. "Full Auto", a racing-combat hybrid from 2006, pioneered the idea. Last year's "Grid" had a flashback button that let you try again if you misjudged a corner or crashed into a wall. Codemasters, the company behind "Grid", then included the same feature in "Dirt 2", a rally-driving game that came out in September. Rewind also appears in "Forza Motorsport 3", released in October; it is fast becoming a standard feature of racing games.

Rewind is a godsend because making a single slip-up no longer means you have to start the whole race all over again, with a tedious delay while you wait for the game to reload. Hitting a rewind button instead is much quicker, and makes it easier to learn the vagaries of a particular car or track. Purist fans of racing games feel that rewind is a form of cheating, but they don't have to use it if they don't want to. Instead of punishing you for making a mistake, rewinding lets you have another try right away. Games are, after all, meant to be fun.

A TASTE OF THE

divine

In 1668 a young monk was appointed cellar master of the great Benedictine Abbey of Hautvillers in France. His name was Dom Pierre Pérignon and, paying homage to the Divine Creator, he made it his mission to create 'the best wine in the world'.



Left: Claudia Schiffer photographed by Karl Lagerfeld for the Dom Pérignon Œnothèque campaign. **Below:** The Abbey of Hautvillers, where Dom Pérignon developed champagne-making techniques in the 17th Century. **Right:** Each vintage ages for at least 7 years in the cellars before being disgorged and released by the Chef de Cave. **Below right:** Marc Newson and his limited edition magnum ice bucket, one of his exclusive designs for Dom Pérignon.

More than three centuries later, the champagne that bears his name has become synonymous with luxury, style and the highest standards of wine-making.

So how did a drink created by a seventeenth century monk turn into a world famous icon? The answer lies in the court of Louis XIV. As Dom Pérignon developed his revolutionary méthode champenoise - bringing a still wine to life and transforming each bubble into gold - the Sun King was simultaneously presiding over an artistic flowering that redefined cultural styles and customs. For the aristocrats of his court, Dom Pérignon's creation became a taste sensation that captured the effervescent spirit of their time.

Through the eighteenth century Age of Pleasure to the Golden Age of Hollywood, this iconic wine has continued its association with those at the forefront of glamour and creativity. Madame de Pompadour, mistress of the all-powerful Louis XV, declared that 'Champagne is the only wine that makes women beautiful after drinking.' Marilyn Monroe seemed to agree, famously taking a stock of Dom Pérignon bottles on a date with a young Danish screenwriter. F. Scott Fitzgerald, chronicler of the Jazz Age, enjoyed sipping it at the Ritz with his beautiful wife Zelda, while couturier and gourmet cook Christian Dior dreamed up a recipe for chicken that called for the use of an entire bottle. Grace Kelly, Elizabeth Taylor, and Marlene Dietrich have all been devotees, with the latter declaring that 'if you manage to get a perfectly chilled Dom Pérignon in a beautiful glass on the terrace of a Parisian restaurant with a view of trees in mid-autumn sunshine, you'll feel like the most divine person in the world.'

Never falling out of fashion, the secret of Dom Pérignon's success has been the way it reinvents itself with each new vintage. Aged in the cellars for a minimum of seven years before its release, a new vintage is only ever declared when the Chef de Cave believes it meets the exceptional standards the makers of Dom Pérignon have strived to achieve since its birth. Continually refined and perfected in the spirit of the wine's founder, each vintage is therefore a new creation, subtly different from the one that has gone before yet always retaining its distinctive intensity, silky, caressing texture and unrivalled way of holding a note.

When Dom Pérignon first tasted his extraordinary creation he is reported to have called out to his fellow monks, 'Come quickly, I am drinking stars'. Nearly three hundred and fifty years later, with a new set of disciples that range from fashion supremo Karl Lagerfeld to influential designer Marc Newson, it seems that the stars are still drinking Dom Pérignon.

For an opportunity to be one of twenty people selected to attend an exclusive tasting of Dom Pérignon vintage in their private ballroom at Grosvenor Crescent, London visit www.moreintelligentlife.com/domperignon

JEWELLERY

Their dark materials

Jewellery doesn't have to be treasure to be treasured. LIZ FORSYTH meets four young designers who make collectable pieces out of unpromising beginnings

THE JEWELLER WHO best mixed the precious with the mundane was himself a bit of a mash-up. Andrew Grima, who died in 2007 aged 86, was born in Italy, raised in Britain, and spent the latter part of his career in Switzerland. From the late 1950s on, and with no professional training, he pioneered just about everything that is now regarded as modern in jewellery: texturing gold, not buffing it smooth; jamming huge, uncut gems into wildly theatrical settings; and in particular treating common-or-garden materials as if they were superstars, displaying tourmalines as extravagantly as D-flawless diamonds, and polishing wood as lovingly as platinum.

Grima had an artist's desire to explore the possibilities of all solid matter, however apparently pedestrian, and it's no accident that three of the four young jewellers featured here have spent time at art school. All are determined to extend the boundaries of what jewellery can and should be made of. Old watch mechanisms? Yes. Walrus teeth? No problem. They have a democratic disregard for the old divisions of precious, semi-precious and base, mixing and matching materials as a sculptor might. So while buying such pieces as investment is something of a punt—a mammoth-tusk ring may not be so reliably a girl's best friend as a diamond – they are beautiful. And that's worth putting your money on.

BIBI VAN DER VELDEN

When she was a child, Bibi van der Velden's Dutch parents took her to live in a "magical house". A Victorian pile in rural Surrey, it had its own ghost (a little girl in a pink dress), a tunnel that led underground to a nearby church and, most excitingly for a child whose imagination was fired by treasures, a "box of artefacts: documents going back to the 1500s, goblets, ivory pipes, shards of pottery, a single, faded velvet shoe".

Bibi (*left*) is 29 now, a sculptor and goldsmith with a no-nonsense manner who lives in the sensible heart of the Netherlands; but the gothic romance of that box and its contents still animate her work. In her "wearable art" collection, she interlaces slightly macabre objects found in flea markets – tiny, porcelain doll's hands, a cuff of spidery lace, cameo buttons peachy with age – with rock crystals, teeth, baroque pearls and shell to create neckpieces and cuffs that are both delicate, and delicately threatening.

More recently, those ivory pipes seem to have taken hold. For the past year, she's been carving jewellery from single pieces of fossilised mammoth tusk, revealed by the melting Siberian permafrost and preserved with a special wax sourced from the British Museum. Though cold-blooded reptiles dominate the designs – tiny snakes hatch from egg-shaped pendants, dragons are studded with warty tsavorites – the milky warmth of the mammoth ivory keeps the overall effect strangely tender, and make for pieces that look just as well worn by men as women. Or ghosts.

From top: tusk and tsavorite earrings, £2985; pearl and mother of pearl tooth necklace, £1,345; tusk and tsavorite ring, £1,095. Stockists: www.bibivandervelden.com and www.doverstreetmarket.com

PHOTOGRAPHS DIVER AGUILAR STYLING MARCELLA MARTINELLI

HEMMERLE

The Hemmerle family are used to the pretty and the glittery: according to Christian (*left*) – at 29, their youngest member – in the 19th century they tended to Bavaria's crown jewels, and for many years after retailed high-end diamond jewellery from their Munich shop. Then, in the late 1990s, Stefan Hemmerle, Christian's father, had an epiphany. A client asked him to design some pieces for his wife, who, somewhat forbiddingly, "didn't like jewellery". The result – a torque of thick black iron, set at the ends with two huge, mismatched diamonds – broke all the rules and set the family firm on an entirely new course. "It was like a door opening," Christian says, his voice whispery with excitement. "All these ideas flooded through."

The four Hemmerles – father, mother Sylveli, Christian and, latterly, his tiny-boned, decorative Egyptian wife, Yasmin – have spent the years since riding that flood. Though these days Christian clearly leads the way, they design as a team, producing about 400 unique pieces a year, studding bases of wood or oxidised metal with sweetie-like stones in arty, back-to-front colours: black jade, amber moonstones, lime-green garnets. There's a tension in their work between an almost Wagnerian heroic formality and a more eastern lushness that I suspect comes from Yasmin: one minute they might set a large, cut aquamarine of an Aryan blue into an iron bangle of fierce single-mindedness, the next twist hundreds of tiny, polished carnelian beads into a bejewelled rope finished with polished ends of thuja wood.

In pictures, these pieces can appear a little remote; with prices averaging from €5,000-40,000 that's perhaps not surprising. Yet in the (stony, woody) flesh they have warmth and a surprisingly tactile appeal. You want to stroke them, weigh them in your palm, put them on, and not take them off.

Christian is delighted to hear it. The Hemmerle family's work may have been considered intellectually stimulating enough to be exhibited at the notoriously discerning Neue Sammlung, Munich's museum of design, but Christian just wants you to wear it. "Our jewellery is meant to be on the body," he smiles, as polished as a pair of his own coral cufflinks. "Then it can grow and develop. If a customer says to me I want to buy a piece to wear once and then put it in a safe, I will tell them to give it back and go away."

From top: *copper, white gold and tourmaline earrings, coral, copper and pink gold bangles, white gold ring with copper, spinel and sapphires, all prices on application, via www.hemmerle.com*

LUCY HUTCHINGS

"I've always been very three-dimensional," says Lucy Hutchings, a lively, clear-headed 28-year-old (*left*). "I grew up in the Suffolk countryside and was always fiddling about creating things out of natural materials I'd find in the garden." She went on to join the wood, metals, ceramics and plastics course at Brighton university, "because I was passionate about working with materials". For her degree show, for which she earned a first, she mixed feathers, fur and butterfly wings – and the feathers have stuck. Literally: for her first two collections, sold in London by Liberty and the East End boutique Start, Hutchings glues the quill ends of iridescent feathers one by one onto wooden balls "in the same pattern they grow on the bird", then wraps them tightly in a fine silk tulle. These peacocky beads are then trapped in metal cage-like structures and attached to transparent rubber tubing or suspended from ribbons; the net prevents the feathery texture becoming the issue, and instead allows the shifting colours to take centre stage, like petrol on the surface of a puddle.

Like all the jewellers here, Hutchings seems to get as much pleasure and excitement from gathering her materials as from the designing. While the Hemmerles go misty-eyed about the "emotional" joy of finding stones that "speak", Lucy admits to spending months filling "tray after tray with things from all over the place: fabric stores, bead shops, markets. Then I start playing."

Her best work is supersized – her big-bead and geometric "breastplate" necklaces may cost upwards of £400, but they have a confidence and presence missing from her smaller-scale, less expensive rings and pendants. Nonetheless, she's determined to offer pieces at all prices; at least for now. When I asked her about the future, she admitted that she'd love to work with diamonds. "But finding one big enough might be a problem."

From top: glass and crystal earrings, £135; shell pearl and gold plate ring, £85; feathered bead, rubber and gold plate necklace, £490. Stockists: www.lucyhutchings.com

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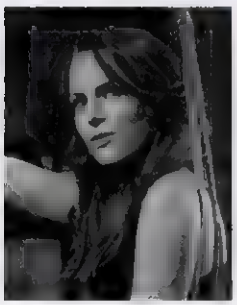

JESSICA MCCORMACK

Of the four jewellers here, Jessica McCormack (*left*) – a slim and frankly beautiful 30-year-old New Zealander – probably edges closest to the traditional. Her work always includes diamonds somewhere along the line; her rings won't take anybody's eye out if you gesture too wildly at a social event; and she calls her necklaces "necklaces", not neckpieces, breastplates or capes. Yet for all its wearability, her work has a gritty edge, gently poking fun at the pretension of *haute joaillerie* while still indulging man's (and particularly woman's) jackdaw love of all things sparkly and expensive.

Like both van der Velden and Hutchings, McCormack is a compulsive collector of stuff – she sells her jewellery from a by-appointment-only "salon", a room of wonders in east London throbbing with alternative treasures she's found, all of which are for sale. She also came to designing by an unusual route; after studying art history, she started her career as an intern in the Victorian jewellery department of Sotheby's in London. Fascinated by the clarity and purity of the gemstones, but put off by their fusty, fussy settings, she started sketching drawings of diamond jewellery that, she says, "younger people could wear".

She wins the youth vote several ways. One is urban references: a ring of rectangular diamonds stacked like the New York skyline, or a pair of orb-and-spike earrings that echo the shape of London's Telecom Tower while remaining bewitchingly feminine. Another is to combine the wink of white diamonds with the where-there's-muck pragmatism of brass and old watch parts. She may set a single stone in a cogwheel and mount it on a leather strap for a transgender take on the bracelet. Or she inserts what she calls "hidden" diamonds into the ends of Victorian pocketwatch-winders, hanging them on delicate chains to make pendants that look particularly effective worn in multiples, dog-tag style, with jeans and a plain shirt. The result is cool, rock 'n' roll – and very collectable. ■

From top: *diamond, yellow gold and leather earrings £15,000; multi-key pendant, silver brass and round diamond £1,500; gold gilt chain £550; round pocket watch key pendant, silver brass and heart-shaped diamond £1,750; square antique pocket watch key, silver brass with round diamond £400. Stockist: www.jessicamccormack.com*

HAND MODEL: GEMMA HOWORTH @ HAND MODELS 1; MODEL: HLOE HUNTER @ M MODELS MAKE-UP: CAROL BROWN @ DWM HAIR: PIERO @ DWM

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The Snug at Home House

The private members' club is an effortlessly British institution. Home House—a classically handsome Robert Adam edifice in London's Portman Square, and one-time French Embassy—is a fine example of the genre.

One of just 26 bottles of Martell's hotly anticipated 'Creation' label cognac—the closest aficionados can get to a 19th-century cognac flavour

With the opening of The Martell Snug, Home House has a new mission. It is now a gathering-place for those who seek a cognac experience beyond compare.

Subtly complementing the club's discreet blend of 18th-century splendour and 21st-century avant-garde, The Martell Snug cocoons its discerning clientele in a warm, intimate ambience of bespoke hand-made leather sofas and historical French maps, portraits and glassware. In this tranquil refuge, cognac devotees can evoke times past while quietly savouring the very best efforts of Martell Cognac, the world's oldest major cognac house.

Martell's 294-year history has been built on the stubborn conviction that only the rarest Tronçais oak barrels and Borderies eaux-de-vies—the clear wines which give Martell cognac its distinctive layered flavour—should be used in the distillation and storage processes.

This dedication to perfectionism has produced Martell XO, an elegant sipping cognac that is the connoisseur's choice of spirit for the festive period and the dark, cold nights ahead. Complexity is one measure of a cognac's quality. Martell XO features no less than two hundred eaux-de-vies, none younger than fifteen years old, many of them centenarians. This is, quite literally, a historic drink, best enjoyed with fine chocolate, coffee or a cigar in the equally memorable surroundings of The Martell Snug.

This is one of just three British bars where demanding palates will be granted access to the robust character and long finish of Martell's latest masterpiece, the much-anticipated Creation. Even before its rigorously limited public release—just 26 bottles will arrive in the UK this year – Creation has already gained legendary status. This ancient and labyrinthine union of 400 eaux-de-vies and crus dating back to 1830 is the closest aficionados can get to cognac from the 19th century, outside the fabled private 'Paradis' cellars of Martell.

Heritage and modernity, bridged by timeless craftsmanship. Martell XO and Martell Creation, in The Martell Snug.

Martell
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www.martell.com
www.homehouse.co.uk

ENJOY MARTELL RESPONSIBLY. drinkaware.co.uk for the facts

STYLE

THE LINE OF BEAUTY

The leather jacket

It's warm, it's cool, it's been around since man first cured an animal skin, and the winter shows couldn't get enough of it. MATTHEW SWEET traces the story of a garment beloved of the bad and the beautiful

Leather jerkin c1560

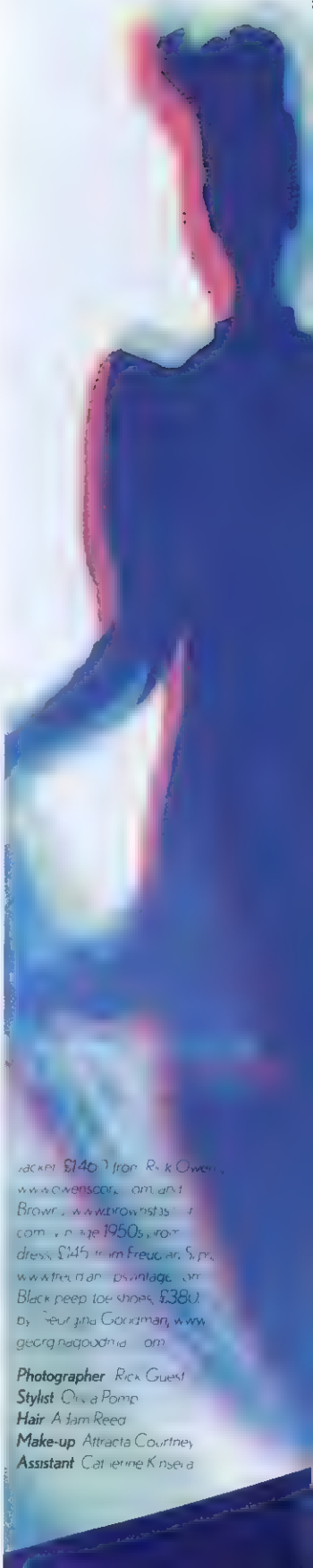
It ought to be disgusting: hacked from the flanks of a beast and cured in a soup of uric effluvia. But the leather jacket is also a locus of desire. Joseph Fiennes wore something very like this black, medieval babe-magnet in "Shakespeare in Love". It made him look like a dodgy flamenco teacher, but during the reign of the Virgin Queen this jerkin would lend the wearer all the masculine allure of a Spanish soldier who had just beaten off a phalanx of Moors. There are hundreds of little hearts punched into its sleek skin – they stand, surely, for those the owner hoped to break, or fill with murderous envy.

Amelia Earhart 1928

By the age of the aviatrix, the speed queen and the lady golfer, women had been in leather for over 300 years. But as worn by Amelia Earhart – the first woman to fly solo over the Atlantic – the leather jacket entered the realm of abstraction. This photograph was taken less than a decade before Earhart and her plane disappeared over the Pacific. But the length and the altitude of her flight seem nothing to that achieved here by her cheekbones and her lapels: the lines and contours of a go-faster modernism from the dreams of Wyndham Lewis.

Rick Owens 2009

So yes, whether Armani, Haider Ackermann or Vuitton, just about every designer in fashion's alphabet is pushing some version of rock-chick leather this winter. But only Rick Owens really owns the territory. He has the hair (black, waist-length), the background (Californian) and the wife (tattooed, heavily). He also has the skill, having spent 13 years making leather jackets that combine a grungy, art-rock sensibility with hypodermic-sharp couture construction. Wear one open over bias-cut silk, or zipped up over a vintage prom-dress, and it turns the volume straight up to 11.

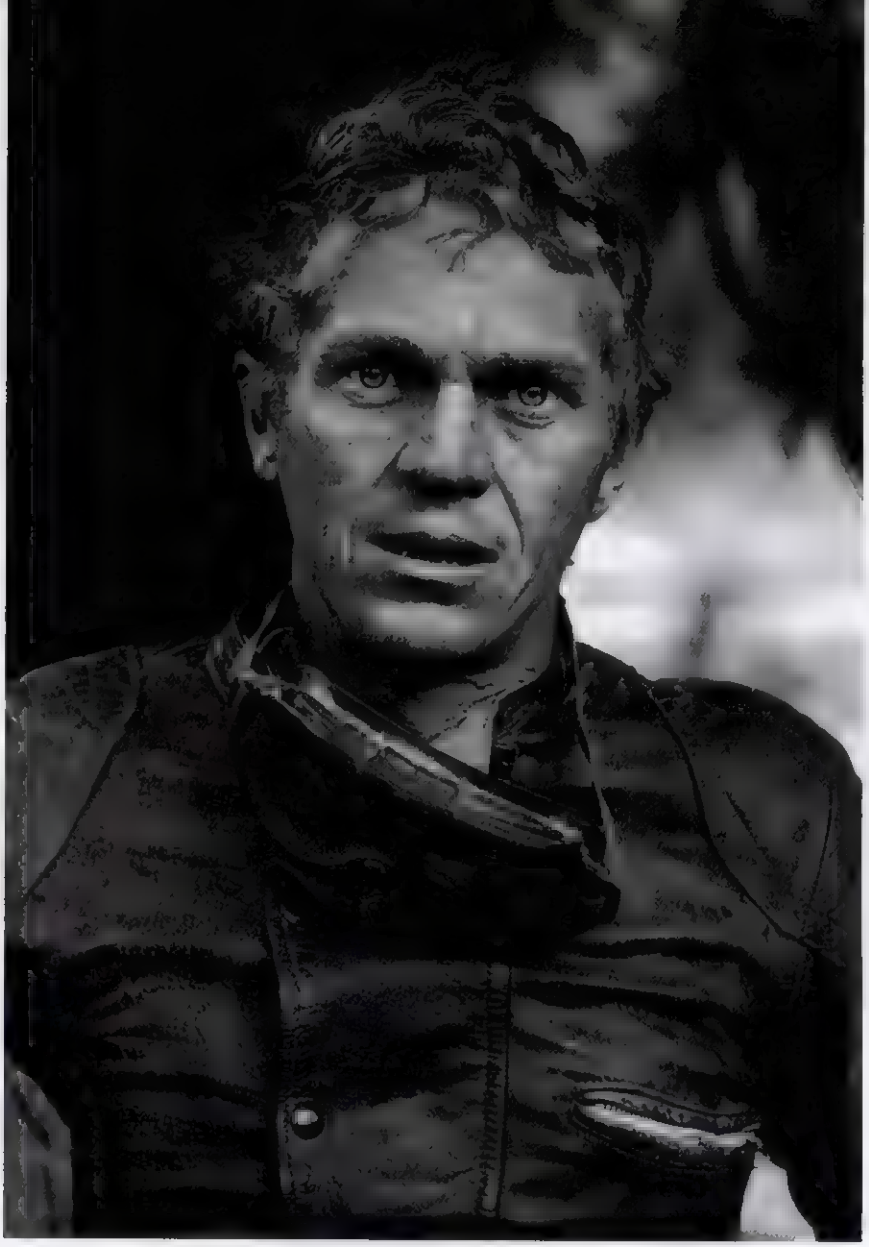


jacket £1460 from Rick Owens, www.owenscorp.com and Brown, www.brownstas[illegible].com; vintage 1950s prom dress, £145 from Freudian Slips, www.freudianslipsvintage.com; Black peep toe shoes, £380 by Georgina Goodman, www.georginagoodman.com

Photographer *Rick Guest*
Stylist *Olivia Pomp*
Hair *Adam Reed*
Make-up *Attracta Courtney*
Assistant *Catherine Kinsella*

US Air Force poster 1944
War is hell. Hell for leather. And the styling of the bomber pilot on this recruitment poster gives the clear impression that it was still possible to look cool while taking part in a heated exchange with the Luftwaffe. In the movies, Errol Flynn, Jimmy Stewart and Gary Cooper wore similar gear, zippered up the middle, at 8,000ft – the beneath-the-ribcage hemline and soft sheepskin lining differentiating their jackets from the sleek and creaking variety favoured by the guys firing back at them.

The British rocker
1950s to the present
This shot may have been taken in the early months of the 21st century, but it tells a story about post-war Britain, and its belief that true masculinity, true ruggedness, was an American phenomenon. The subject is a bloke called Robin. He's a member of the Triumph Motorcycle Club. He had his jacket custom-made in Brighton. The studs might suit a pearly king or queen just as well – but that's an animal on his back, endowing him with some of its spirit, suggesting that his body, too, might contain the power of the untamed horse or buffalo. You never know – Brighton can be pretty rough on a Friday night. >

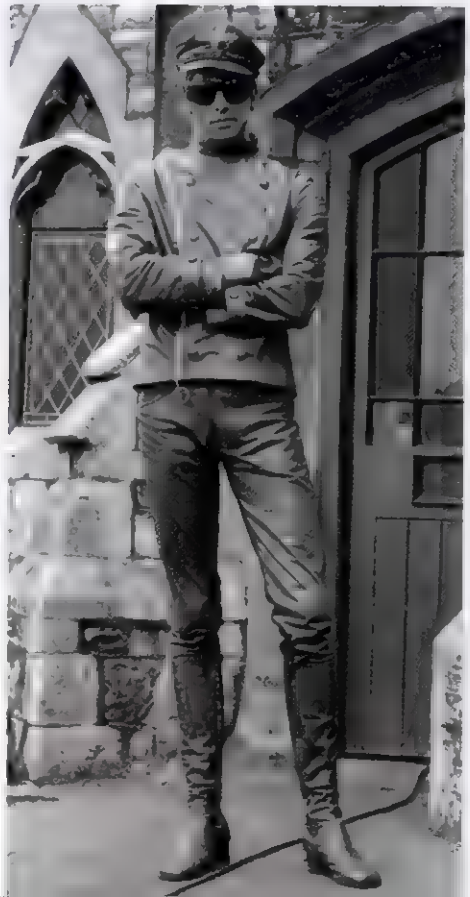


> **Steve McQueen** 1963

It may have been Marlon who first roared into cinemas to assert the metonymy of zippered leather, petrol and teenage rebellion, but it was McQueen who lived the life. Brando liked ice-cream and Lee Strasberg; McQueen liked screeching across the desert with something tough and tanned protecting him from flying rock-chips. In this shot, his own skin, chameleon-like, seems to mimic the texture of his jacket. That stuff that's stretched over his skull: was he born in that? Or did it once stampede over the American landscape on four legs, before being stewed and pinned over his bones?

Black Panthers 1970

It's not an album cover. These are the poster boys of Vietnam-era African-American protest. Maybe others made the mistake: when a pride of Panthers stormed the California State Capitol, a local headline declared "State Police Halt Armed Negro Band". These three alpha cats – June Hilliard, Elbert Howard, Donald Cox – wear leather as self-consciously as any rock band. Officialdom got the point: the Panthers were "blessed with a theatrical sixth sense that enabled them to...project an image [that] frightened America". The voice of a US government report, but it might be a review from *Rolling Stone*.



"Entertaining Mr Sloane" 1970

"How do I dress like Brando in 'The Wild One' without looking gay?" asks a correspondent to an internet fashion site. No chance, chum. Not since the signifiers of tough, martial masculinity were claimed by the forces of macho drag. It happened in the 1960s, of course: Honor Blackman and Diana Rigg wore zippered leather while high-kicking the soft parts of unlikely Soviet spies. Here Peter McEnery's Mr Sloane sports a chauffeur's uniform that looks like the joint work of Tom of Finland, the author of "Story of O" and Hugo Boss in his SS period – and makes leather the property of the polymorphously perverse.

BRIDGEMAN GETTY CORBIS MIKE DIVER RONALD GRANT
EYEVINE GUY BOURDIN/ART+COMMERCE CATWALKING.COM

Guy Bourdin 1982
Bourdin was the king of kink: his fashion images were like stills from lost movies, the sort screened in cinemas without carpets. His women are dominatrices, his men gimps and johns. So the presence of leather in his work is a glossy inevitability. This image, from a Paris *Vogue* shoot, gives you a glimpse of hotel life, Bourdin-style: three figures, presumably on the way to the bedroom. Black leather is a code for badness here: the two-tone women suggest a 1980s take on the old Madonna-whore complex as surely as Joan Collins throwing Linda Evans into a rack of frocks.

Debbie Harry c1985
Blondie's lead singer had been a leather-lover since she squeezed into a child's-size Schott motorcycle jacket discovered in a thrift-shop and partied with the New York Dolls. She was after "a 'West Side Story' tough-girl look", she said, and she got it. Harry is the ne plus ultra of rock chicks in a pantheon that includes Chrissie Hynde, Marianne Faithfull and Siouxsie Sioux. But she's also proof of the promiscuity of the black leather jacket. Is this Earhartian gusto, or more macho drag? Is she a punk nihilist, or a roadhouse line-dancer? The jacket doesn't care: it signals rebellion, but has nothing to say about the cause.

Hermès Paris AW09
Earhart's ghost touches down on the runway in a grey crocodile-skin flying jacket that costs more than the plane in which she met her doom. It's by Hermès and the price tag is a smidgen more than £54,000. *If* you're paying, you're paying for an expertise that predates the dawn of aviation: Hermès started life as a saddlery in the early 19th century, so the firm knows when to look a gift horse in the mouth and when to tan its hide for the purposes of couture. This is not a leather jacket for hanging around in frothy coffee bars. This is a leather jacket to wear while horsewhipping the groom. ■

THE SCEPTICAL SHOPPER

Cashmere

Can a cardie made of goat-coat really be worth £700? Our undercover expert unravels the truth

How can pure cashmere sweaters cost £500 on Bond Street but less than £50 at Marks & Spencer? The short answer is China. The long answer is that a label saying "100% cashmere" tells only 50% of the story.

Cashmere is the downy undercoat grown by goats in extreme cold. The great majority of the world's cashmere comes from Inner Mongolia (an autonomous region of China) and Mongolia (aka Outer Mongolia), where 40m goats contend with temperatures below -30°C. In the spring, as they start to moult, the goats are combed to remove their fine underhair while leaving the outercoat (guard hair) intact. The combings are then washed and "dehaired" of any stray guard hair, so that what is left is pure cashmere.

Pure is not an absolute term. The finest cashmere consists only of the whitest, longest, thinnest hair from the underfleece, whereas lower-quality cashmere may be either the shorter, coarser hair from the undercoat – typically from the rear end of the animal rather than its belly – or, more dubiously, shorter hair that has either not been properly dehaired or, worse still, blended with yak or rabbit hair. When the best white (dehaired) cashmere costs $75 per kilo and one sweater requires at least 200g of fibre, the motive for mass-producers to use cheaper stuff becomes clear.

Cheap cashmere is a 21st-century phenomenon. As recently as the 1990s, China and Mongolia were exporting more raw material than finished garments. The cream of the crop went to Scotland and Italy to be spun, dyed >

Brora "Contemporary" cardigan
Brora excels at colour. As many as six or seven different shades are spun into its yarn, resulting in colours that are deep, subtle and kind to skintones. The berry colour of this cardigan (*right*) sets off its mirrored buttons. *£189; www.brora.co.uk*

N Peal cable cardigan
This chunky but intricate cardigan (*far right*) is from N Peal's contemporary line, designed by Sara and Amiee Berman. It's hand-knitted on manual machines from 12-ply cashmere, so is duvet-warm as well as stylish. The buttons are horn. *£695; www.npeal.com*

Uniqlo crewneck
This mid-grey marl (*just seen*) has class way beyond its price, with a flattering, lower-than-standard neckline, and a substantial knit. Uniqlo's range by Jil Sander mixes cashmere with 8% polyamide, but this is the one for purists. *From £49.99; www.uniqlo.co.uk*

PHOTOGRAPHS **NEIL MERSH**
STYLIST **SALLY CONRAN**
Mannequins from Caravan; www.caravanstyle.com

David Bowie by David Wedgbury, 1966 © National Portrait Gallery, London

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> and knitted. The costs and expertise involved made it a luxury product, though styles were mostly plain and came in colours – navy blue, bottle green – as staid as the plaid they were meant to be worn with.

Two things shook cashmere out of its heritage niche. In the mid-1990s young designers such as Clements Ribeiro put creative cashmere on the catwalk, while stalwarts like Pringle and Ballantyne broadened their ranges beyond the Argyle pattern that had made them famous in the era of Edward and Mrs Simpson. More significantly, China began to manufacture cashmere in vast volumes; when European Union import quotas were relaxed in 2005, cashmere poured onto British high streets at unheard-of prices.

Today Asda sells men's "pure cashmere" v-necks for £17.50. M&S's basics now cost £49.50. How do they do it? By mass production – M&S cashmere is made by the Chinese cashmere giant King Deer, which can process 400,000 units at a time – and by cutting corners. The fibre has a hair length of 28-30mm (premium is 36mm-plus) and it is knitted lightly. So the customer gets inferior material, and less of it.

Yet even cheap cashmere can feel lovely. It's hard to know, as you queue at the till, whether your bargain will pill or sag within days. (Pilling afflicts expensive cashmere too, though it should stop after the first wash.) But there are subtle signs of quality, and once you've got your eye in, much of the cheaper cashmere on the market starts to seem a false economy.

Look for tension in the knitting: stretch a section and it should ping back into shape. Hold it up to the light and you shouldn't see much sky: paradoxically, the best cashmere, though made from the finest hair, has a density to it. Examine its surface: fluffiness suggests the yarn was spun from shorter, weaker fibres and will pill. Be sceptical about softness, too. Overmilling can make a garment too soft and silky, and therefore prone to bobbling and losing its shape. More expensive cashmere may be harder to handle in the shop, but will ease up with wear and hand-washing. The best cashmere actually improves with age – so long as the moths don't get to it.

Brunello Cucinelli roundneck jumper *(above left)*
A classic, perfectly executed and given a gentle twist with two details: a thin line of contrast grey at the nape of the neck, and elbow patches in suede so buttery you may well sigh when you touch them. The cashmere feels impeccable, as you'd hope at the eye-watering price. *£495; www.brunellocucinelli.it*

Pure Collection roundneck cardigan *(centre)*
High quality, classic styles and keen prices have made Pure Collection Britain's leading online cashmere specialist, offering efficient mail order with a human voice. This cardigan's tubular hem means it sits flat on the hip; and the Heather Rhubarb marl is good enough to be a Brora colour. *£109; www.purecollection.com*

Marks & Spencer Autograph hoodie *(right)*
Although M&S's cashmere perennials are a bit mumsy in both cut and colour, its one-offs can hit the spot. This light-camel hoody is snug, not skimpy, with a deep welt that keeps it sitting firmly on the bum, and nice detailing around the zip. It's just a pity the square pockets aren't a more ergonomic pouch for cold hands. *£125, www.marksandspencer.com*

Another pointer to authenticity is candour. Pure Collection reveals the specification of its cashmere on its website: "Inner Mongolian White for White, 36-38mm, maximum 15.5 micron". That's just about the whitest, longest, thinnest goat hair available. Brora says it uses only the "longer fibres". At the luxury end, Brunello Cucinelli makes the startling claim that "only the fur in a very limited area of the animal's throat is used", while Loro Piana's "baby cashmere" is made of kid-hair with a diameter of just 13-13.5 micron. M&S failed to respond to my questions about the provenance of its cashmere.

Brora and Pure Collection (whose founders own N Peal) score on sustainability, too. Cashmere is a renewable – it grows every winter – but the goats are not exactly eco-warriors. The trouble is they don't nibble grass, but yank it up by the root. With no vegetation to pin it down, the topsoil blows away, grasslands turn to desert and duststorms choke Beijing. For cashmere to be sustainable, the goats must be farmed in enclosures and given extra feed so they don't nuke the grass.

The recession has driven down prices in Europe, but it is hard to see them staying so low. Meanwhile, mid-priced cashmere looks good value. Pure Collection has basics from £89. Brora costs more (from £169 for a v-neck) because it is made in Scotland, and Scottish cashmere has long been considered the best – but Chinese knitting machines can now deliver on sophistication as well as price. Consequently, Pure Collection and N Peal run a vertical operation in Inner Mongolia where quality can be controlled "from goat to garment".

If money were no object, and greed no sin, I'd stack my shelves with Brunello Cucinelli, not so much for the throat of the goat but the perfection of the knitting. And if money were tight, I'd settle for Uniqlo, where a well-cut crewneck costs £59.99 and seems promisingly unfluffy to touch.

What I'd find hard to contemplate is wearing anything else. Cashmere is so soft, light and warm that it makes even merino, the king of lambswool, feel a bit like a school jumper. ■

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MAN IN A SUIT

Niall McLaughlin

The man behind the Deal Pier café smartens up the English seaside

The man

"One of those moments when you could turn left, but you turn right." Niall McLaughlin, a Swiss-born Irishman, is describing becoming an architect, nearly 30 years ago. He now has a thriving practice based in Hoxton. Deal Pier in Kent was shortlisted for the Stephen Lawrence Prize last week. Below £1m. The pier will have many visitors this winter as the scene of an artwork, "Streetlight Storm" by Katy Peterson, which will flicker every time lightning strikes around the globe. The café, glimpsed at the top of the picture, is like a splattery butterfly that has just blown in from the sea. McLaughlin likes to get out and about, to see and feel buildings that score high on his "envy meter", and make his work more than just drawings on a page – it's about the people inside. He recalls a moment on a recent visit to the pier: "Fishermen were hunkered down like troglodytes under the top deck, then a man said hello and it turned out to be Tracey Emin's brother." What would be his ideal commission? "To design a building for the desert, like Phoenix."

The suit

McLaughlin is 6ft 4ins: that's a lot of architect to cover. The best menswear designers often make clothes that suit themselves, so the natural place to turn was Richard James, an award-winning Savile Row tailor who's not short of a few inches. The break in the jacket in this off-the-peg wool suit comes at just the right place for a man of McLaughlin's size, while the white shirt lifts and brightens its deep sea-blue. Paul Smith shoes typically have a bit of an edge – and an extra length that helps balance Niall's height. What did the model himself think? "I never wear black, so was thrilled with the choice of petrol-blue. It's a great colour to wear by the sea." – LUCY FARMER

THE DETAILS

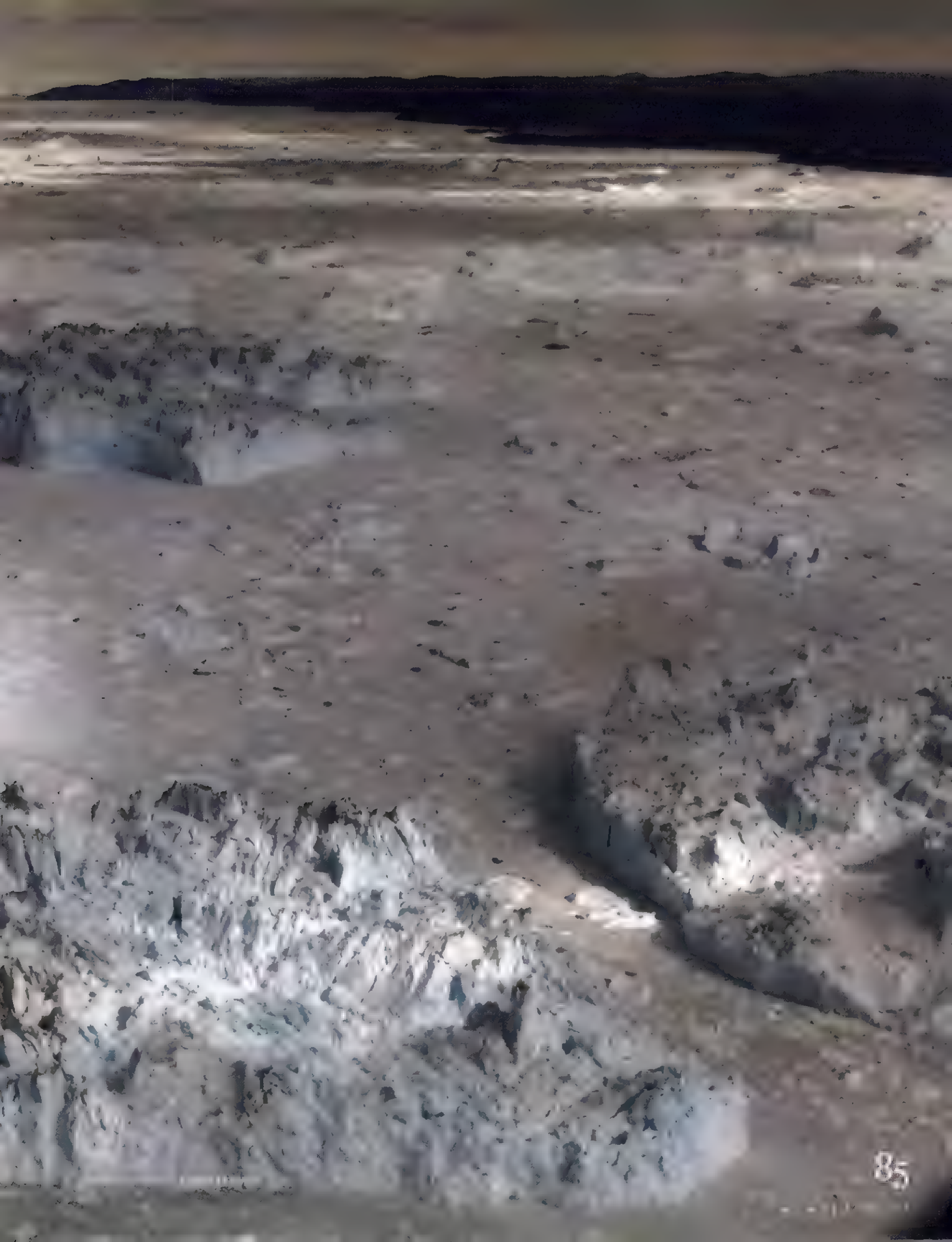
Blue plain worsted suit, £895, white poplin shirt, £185, and pale blue and white woven silk tie, £85, all by Richard James; belt, £160, by Canali; black Assam brogues, £225, by Paul Smith

PHOTOGRAPHER *ULI WEBER*
STYLIST *OLIVIA POMP*

STOCKISTS
Canali www.canali.com
Paul Smith www.paulsmith.com
Richard James www.richardjames.co.uk

ON THIN ICE

While the politicians fiddle, the world keeps warming. The Arctic may be down to its last few summers of being white. Johann Han, in Greenland, asks hunters and scientists how climate change really feels – and hears about a curious twist in the tale



THE GROUND BENEATH my feet is trembling. In front of me there is a great white wall of frozen water 700 metres high, sparkling in the sun as though threaded with silver dust. I have been deposited by a helicopter on a rock nearby, to watch the fastest-retreating glacier in the Arctic. For a moment, there is silence, and the ice sheet looks as durable as rock. But then there is a low sound, like a slow sigh from the bowels of the ice, and suddenly a bomb blast seems to echo in all directions. A gargantuan chunk of ice has crashed off. It smashes down onto the earth as a newborn iceberg. From here, it will sail out to sea, and liquefy. It leaves behind a gash in the ice sheet that looks like a long scar. However many times you may have seen this on television, there is nothing like seeing it for yourself.

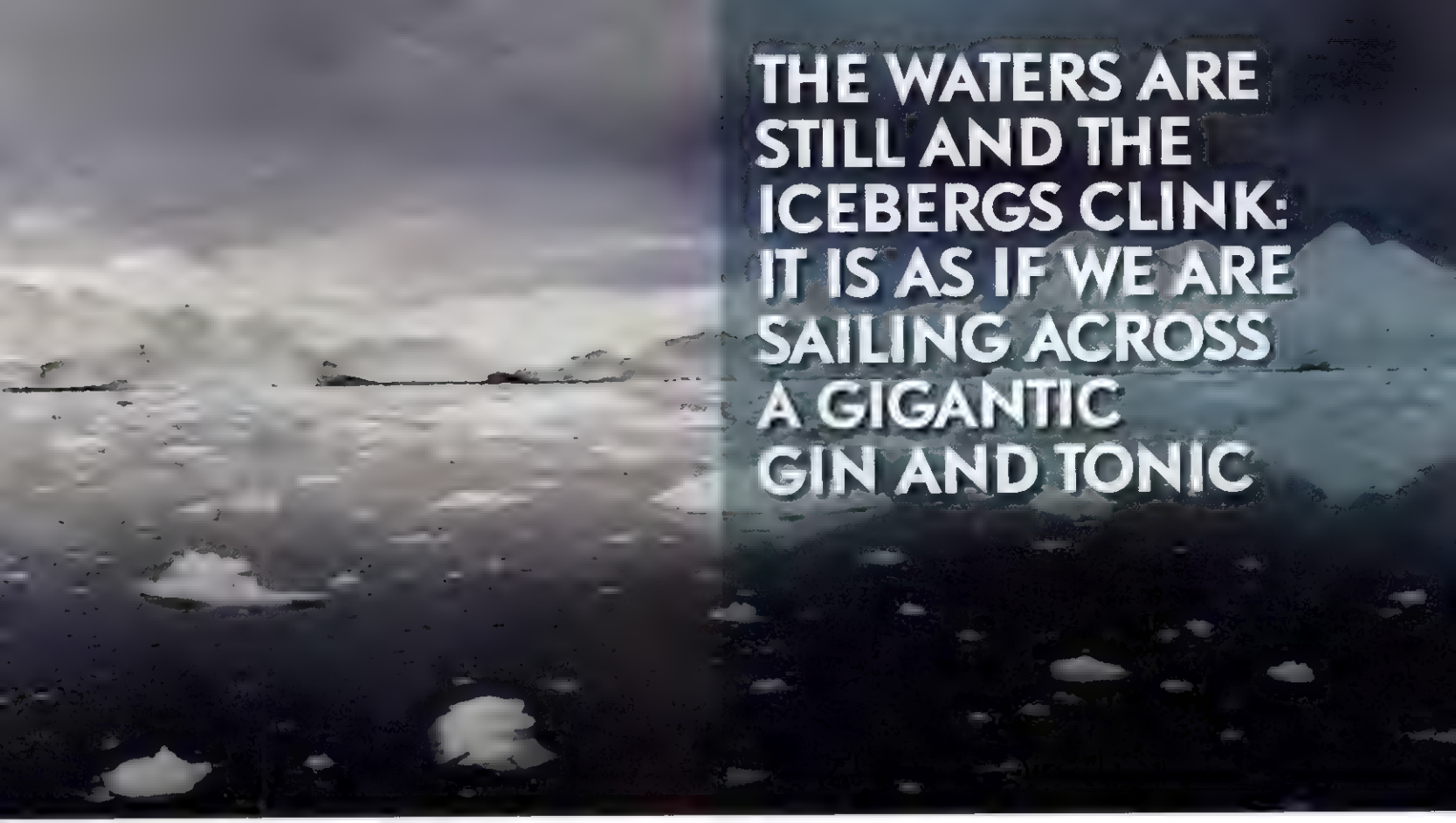
Soon there is silence again. The ice seems as serene as it ever was. But then there is another sigh, another explosion, another iceberg. And on it goes, all day, all summer. The people of Ilulissat in Greenland watch the corpse of the ice sheet floating past them in the form of freakishly large icebergs.

The last days of the Arctic as we know it appear to have begun. Since the year I was born, 1979, nearly 40% of the Arctic's summer sea ice has melted into the oceans, and the rate is accelerating. One day – some scientists predict around 2015, others say 2030, and a few hope for 2070 – there will be nothing in summer but a silent stretch of water at the top of the world. The North Pole will be a point in the open ocean, accessible by boat. Perhaps somebody will found Sir John Franklin Shipping, in memory of the man who died in an unrecognisable landscape trying to reach this spot. The Arctic as it has existed for all of human history will be over.

The scientists who study the glacier before me say it is vanishing, leaving an open wound at an entry-point to the Greenland ice sheet, a gash through which the ice is beginning to bleed away. But this great Arctic ice sheet locks up 10% of the world's fresh water, and holds seven metres of sea-level rise in its frozen grasp. It is 1,570 miles long, 680 miles wide, and up to two miles thick. It is much harder to melt than sea ice, but if even a seventh of it goes – as now seems probable this century – then chunks of the most populated parts of the world, from London to Bangladesh to Manhattan, go with it. We have all been living on the edge of the Greenland ice sheet; we just didn't realise it till now.

I CAME TO the Arctic because no matter how many warnings we read, these descriptions still seem unreal, unfathomable. How does one of the most evocative parts of the map – one seen ever since it was discovered as a sign of indomitable nature – become transformed? How can it change our lives in our warm, dry cities far away? The journey took me to some of the most immediate evidence of global warming, and to the two shellshocked groups living through the last years of a frozen Arctic: the climate scientists and the Inuit.

"We knew about global warming long before you read about it in your newspapers," says Niels Gundel, as he cocks his rifle and peers out across the water. He is speaking Greenlandic, with a tour guide acting as interpreter. "We knew something strange was happening, something we hadn't seen before." He is a 50-year-old Inuit hunter, a small, drawn man swaddled in a big blue jacket, and he has taken me out to



THE WATERS ARE STILL AND THE ICEBERGS CLINK: IT IS AS IF WE ARE SAILING ACROSS A GIGANTIC GIN AND TONIC

"We have all been living on the edge of the ice sheet"
Icebergs produced by the Ilulissat glacier

hunt seal in Ilulissat bay on a tiny white boat with a chug-chug engine. We weave between the drip-dripping icebergs, looking for the flapping of a tiny black hand in the water for Gundel to take aim at. The waters are still and the icebergs clink: it is as if we are sailing across a gigantic gin and tonic.

Gundel says that for 2,000 years, the Inuit – formerly known as "eskimos", which to many is a derogatory term that means "eaters of raw meat" – have lived at the edges of the Arctic ice. It is their life and their world. "In all this time we Inuit have always had two seasons," he says. "In winter, we go ice-hunting and dog-sledding. In summer, we fish and hunt in boats. But now we have lost the winter, and summer has changed completely." Starting in the 1980s, with each passing year the winter ice has formed later in the year, and become thinner. Now it is just slush. "You can't go hunting on ice like that. It'll break. So now we can't gather food in the winter at all. If you couldn't get to the supermarket, you couldn't get food. If we can't get to the hunting areas, we can't get food."

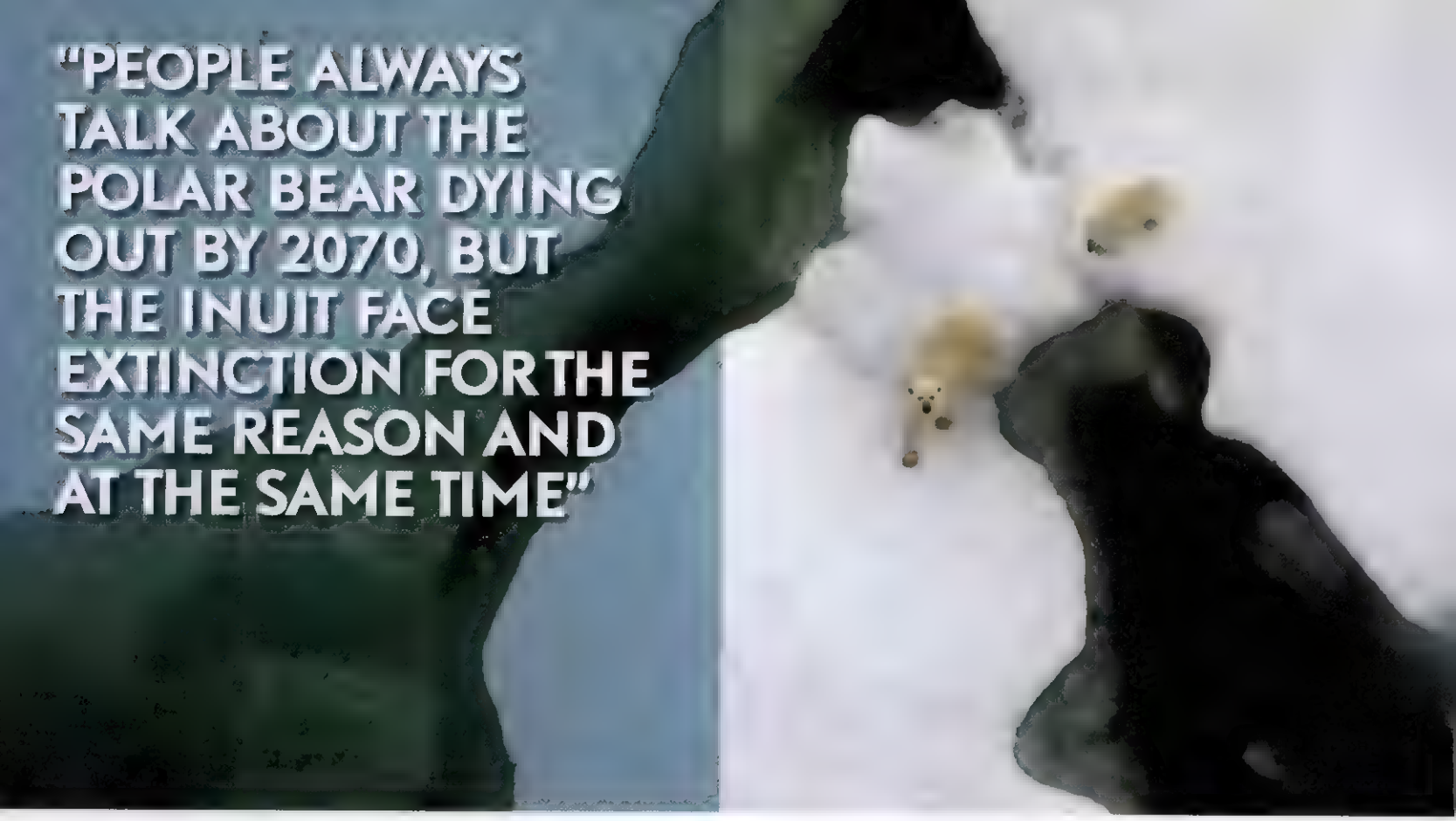
In a second, his body tenses, and his rifle is clicked straight. He has seen a seal's head ripple through the water. He moves the boat quietly closer, and a bang echoes around the icebergs. A thick streak of blood stains the blue murk of the water. He hauls the seal's body onto the boat and lets its leaking head remain flopped out. It is surprisingly small: about the size of a one-year-old baby. He pinches its fur, which is loose; the seal is thin. "This is one of the other changes," he says, shaking his head. "Even in summer, the seals are so much thinner. I don't know why. The fishing is worse too. The halibut are gone. Some have gone farther north because they don't like the warmer water that has come here…Some are being eaten by all the narwhals that we used to hunt in the winter, but now live and eat them all. There has been a return of cod, but cod prices are very low. Nobody wants cod."

We are drifting again, silently, looking for more seals. "Hunting is our identity," he says. "Hunting is life for Inuit." Niels was taught to hunt by his father and grandfather when he was five. They showed him how to navigate by the stars, steer a sled, predict the behaviour of prey. A boy's first hunt – when he turns 13 – is considered a turning-point, the moment he becomes a man. In every Inuit home, there are taxidermied beasts staring out, mementoes of hunts gone by. He once went hunting for a polar bear, he says. Is that dangerous? "Yes," he says. "For the polar bear."

He smiles – a big warming smile – then seems to remember himself, and frowns. "In ten years, there will be no hunting if this warming carries on," he says. How does that make him feel? His eyes flicker, but he doesn't answer.

Across the Arctic, the Inuit are seeing the world they know leak into the seas. An area the size of France, Portugal and Spain has melted in just 30 years. In Alaska, in Siberia, in Canada, villages are falling into the sea because the ice that once protected them from storm surges is gone. In other places, the hardened permafrost that has stood beneath their feet for 120,000 years is melting, and anything above is simply sagging into the mud. Collapsing trees and houses jut out of >

"PEOPLE ALWAYS TALK ABOUT THE POLAR BEAR DYING OUT BY 2070, BUT THE INUIT FACE EXTINCTION FOR THE SAME REASON AND AT THE SAME TIME"



Life around the Arctic
ABOVE Polar bear and her cub off Barrow, Alaska
RIGHT Inuit with Narwhal meat, Baffin Island, Canada

> the ground at weird angles. The Inuit joke that these trees and homes are "drunk" – drunk on greenhouse gases.

When they talk about the Great Thaw, the Inuit are reserved and respectful. They note the facts. They tell you in a level tone that the things they value most will vanish. But they do not emote. You sense that, as with the icebergs all around them, six-sevenths remain frozen below the surface, and you will never see it. A rare exception is Sheila Watt-Cloutier, the former head of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, which draws together the 155,000 Inuit across the Arctic. Over the telephone from her home in the thawing Canadian tundra, she tells me: "People are always talking about the polar bear becoming extinct by 2070 because there will be no ice they can hunt seals from, but the Inuit face extinction for the same reason and at the same time. We know the planet is melting and with it our way of life. We are an endangered species too."

Greenland – the corner of the Arctic I have come to – seems like the most unlikely venue for a world-shaking change. This is not a sedate society; it's comatose. The island is a vast, almost entirely empty patch of rock and ice, inhabited by just 56,700 people. There is a rubbish dump in Rio de Janeiro that has more inhabitants. You arrive in one of the tiny Air Greenland planes that look like toys and get booked up weeks in advance. On my first flight, I stumbled to the front of the poky cabin and opened a door that I assumed led to the toilet. I found myself in the cockpit, as if in some strange pre-9/11 flashback. "Hello," the pilot said with a smile. "I am flying."

As you fly or sail along the coast of Greenland, you see only a sterile icy stretch: miles and miles of compacted snow and frost. The oldest travel writer's cliché is to declare "this is a land of contrasts". Greenland is a land of no contrasts. There is one expanse of ice covering almost everything, with only odd patches of brown rock jutting through, a smattering of which are inhabited by Inuit communities. There are so few contrasts that the ice plays tricks on your eyes: with nothing to focus on, the horizon seems impossibly distant, and straight in front of you, all at once. You can't turn its two dimensions into three: you don't know what you are looking at.

No trees or grass grow anywhere: even though they love football, the Greenlanders aren't allowed to join FIFA, because the rules require one grassy pitch somewhere in the country. The name "Greenland" was a PR trick – perhaps the most enduring in history – invented by the Viking leader Erik the Red to lure people here, and away from the more fertile Iceland. But now, it seems, life is going to imitate PR, a thousand years behind schedule.

The Inuit live in little wooden houses painted in bright primary colours to cheer them up in the long winter darkness when the sun sets for six weeks. Their lives move slowly, with the rhythms of the ice. If you try to arrange a meeting, they will tell you it will happen "emahaj" – maybe. It's like the Arabic shrug "inshallah", only even more vague. I was there in the darkless summer, when time doesn't seem to pass: your watch ticks, but the skies stay unchanged. Shops usually have a sim-

AURORA PA

GRAPHIC BY PETER WINFIELD

ple wooden sign saying only: "Shoppen". The island has this year been granted self-rule by Denmark, the former colonial power, but nobody seemed excited by the prospect: they noted it quietly and impassively, as they note everything.

They mark the changes happening here by the season, and with uncomprehending awe. In one town I visit – Tasiilaq, on the bare eastern coast – the Inuit say the weather is becoming weird: in 2004, for the first time anyone can remember, there was a snowless winter. "We couldn't understand it. This is totally beyond our understanding," says Aksel Thule, a 52-year-old fisherman and hunter. "We had to kill our dogs, because we didn't have anything to feed them." Starving polar bears have started to stagger into the town in search of food.

The Arctic writer Barry Lopez described the Inuit as *hibakusha*, the Japanese for "explosion-affected people" who continue to suffer the effects of Hiroshima. "Eskimos are trapped in a long, slow detonation," he wrote. "What they know... about a good way of life is disintegrating."

HOW DID THIS happen to the Arctic? Why is this place warming twice as fast as anywhere else? In Nuuk, the soporific capital of Greenland, I attend a conference of 150 climate scientists from across the world, who sit in a warm, dry theatre to hear a battery of presentations. Most argue that the sea ice is doomed, and the Arctic ice caps are more vulnerable to melting than anybody thought.

Each night I carry back piles of scientific papers to my hotel room and pore over them. I drag scientist after scientist into the bar and ask them to explain this process to me. It soon becomes clear the most important concept for understanding why these changes are happening so fast – and will be irreversible – is "feedback". This is where a small amount of warming triggers a change that then causes more warming. This then causes another change which makes the Arctic warmer still. Warming leads to more warming – and on, and on.

You can see this most plainly with the process that lay at the beginning of the current meltdown. The Arctic sea ice has performed a simple and crucial job for us since humans began to walk upright. It is perfectly white and smooth, so when the sun's warming rays hit it, 80% of them bounce back into space. This is called the Albedo effect. But once warming gases started to accumulate in the atmosphere, the Arctic sea ice began to falter and shrivel, so it bounced fewer of the sun's rays away from us. It was replaced in patches by the open ocean, which has the opposite effect: it absorbs 90% of the sun's rays. This melted even more of the Arctic ice, which meant we then absorbed even more of the sun's rays. This is feedback in action: we have replaced a mirror with a sponge.

Beneath the dense thickets of climatological data, there is a sense of shock here – and a terrible exhilaration. When most of these men and women signed up to be climate scientists a generation ago, it was a sleepy field that measured changes across millennia. Now it is measuring change by the season – and it is discovering that the release of warming gases into the atmosphere by man has wrought a dramatic change. Professor David Vaughan of the British Antarctic Survey says: "Just over a century ago, the first human footprint was pressed into the Arctic and Antarctic ice. Today, we all have >

> our footprints in that ice. Every one of us."

As they scramble to gather evidence, there is a growing conviction among many scientists that once the Arctic begins to unravel, it could trigger a series of climatic (and climactic) feedback-disasters. How? Perhaps the wildest wild-card lies buried beneath the Arctic soil. Locked up in its frozen claw is a gargantuan amount of methane. This matters because methane causes 25 times more warming by weight than carbon dioxide. Methane is stored in the Arctic in two different forms – and both are vulnerable to breakdown. On land, it is stored in organic matter that rots when the permafrost thaws. Underneath the seas, on the continental shelves, methane is trapped in a crystal structure of water ice in a form called "methane hydrates".

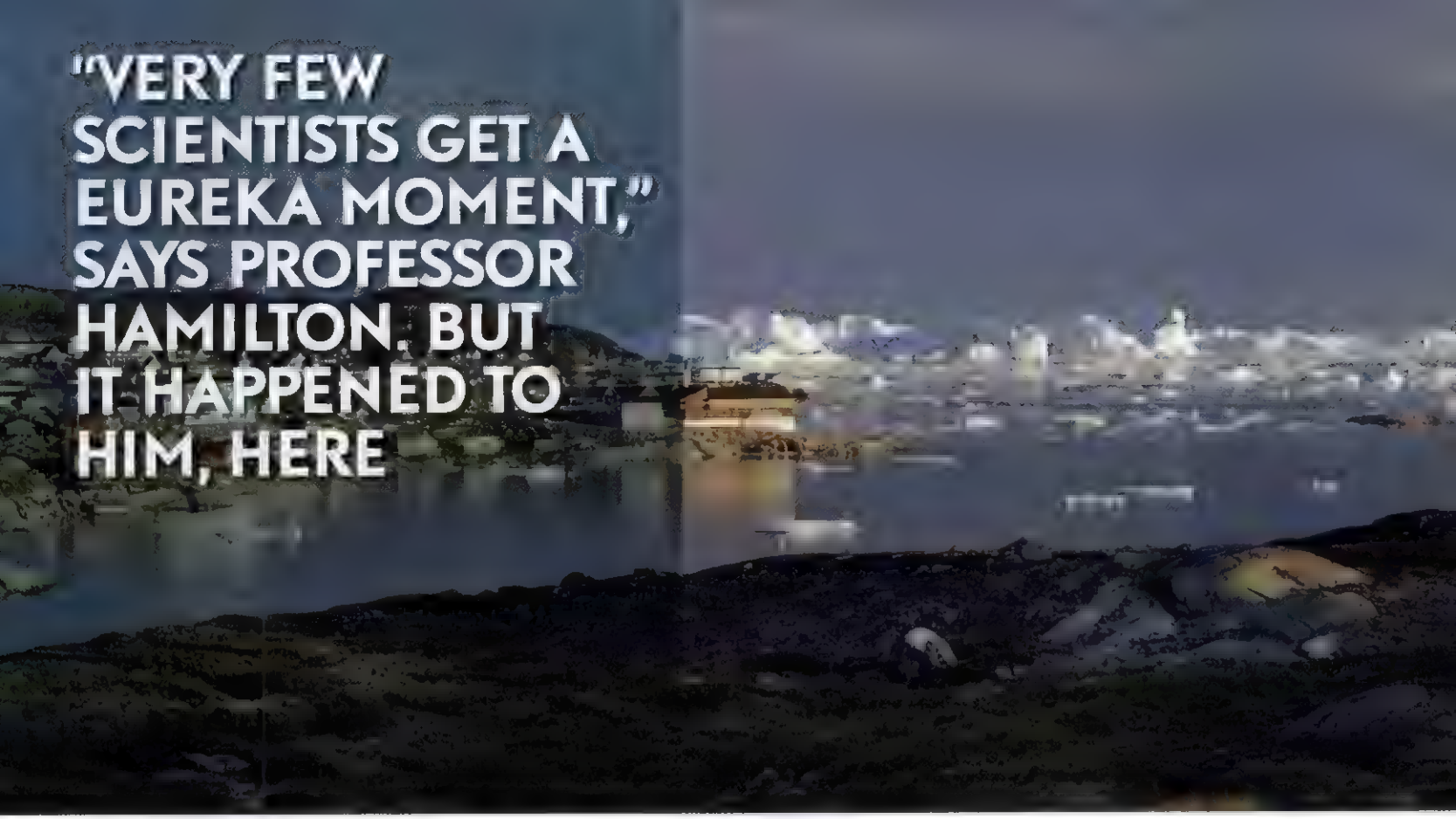
There is reputed to be more carbon stored in these methane hydrates than in every lump of coal and barrel of oil in the world. "If even 1% of the methane stored in Arctic-shelf hydrates were released to the atmosphere, it could cause really abrupt warming," says Susan Joy Hassol, the analyst who along with 300 climate scientists wrote the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, the most widely respected summary of the science affecting the Arctic. Some scientists believe that when this happened 250m years ago, it triggered the largest extinction event in history: 95% of marine animals and 70% of land-based animals died.

We know the permafrost is already going. It's why concrete buildings are sinking into the defrosted mud across Siberia. But how much of it will go? How fast? Nobody knows yet. The scientists have only in the past decade realised how significant this issue is, and started gathering data: they aren't sure if it is highly likely, or highly unlikely. They do know the most vulnerable methane hydrates are located on the East Siberian shelf, where methane is stored very close to the earth's surface. A research expedition this summer found 250 methane plumes bubbling up. If you held a lit match to the ground, a flame would spike out, like a lit blowtorch. Ronald Cohen of the Carnegie Institution for Science in Washington, DC, said it was "amazing" to "see such enormous quantities of methane." And they know that every degree of warming is a terrible gamble, bringing closer the prospect of the great fart at the end of the ecosystem.

I find myself grasping at reasons to be hopeful. The Arctic has been subject to some natural warming in the past: there was a brief heating in the Middle Ages. Couldn't it be happening again? I couldn't find a single scientist who said this was the primary cause. The warming in the past was localised, affecting only parts of the Arctic; this is affecting everywhere, all at once.

My mind keeps sagging back to the Greenland ice sheet, and its capacity to wash away much of the world we know. Hassol tells me: "Melting on Greenland is increasing. If we stay the current course [with increasing emissions]... it will only be a matter of time before most of Greenland melts. People say, what's the rush to address climate change, can't we wait and see? But soon we could cross a tipping point that triggers the irreversible melting of the ice sheet. You can only adapt to so much. How do you adapt to such dramatic change?"

The last IPCC assessment report issued in 2007 was



"VERY FEW SCIENTISTS GET A EUREKA MOMENT," SAYS PROFESSOR HAMILTON. BUT IT HAPPENED TO HIM, HERE

deliberately agnostic on the question of the ice sheet, saying that we didn't have the data to predict how fast it would go. Its relatively modest predictions on sea-level rise were based on the assumption that Greenland would only melt a little – one the authors conceded was based on ignorance. Since then, scientists have come here in numbers to gather the missing data.

Professor Gordon Hamilton, from the Climate Change Institute at the University of Maine, is carrying out the most detailed ice-face study of the Greenland ice sheet. I find him next to a hut-hotel on the coast of east Greenland, stumbling from a helicopter, looking as if he has just stepped off the set of a movie in which he is playing the role of Panicked Climate Action Hero. His muscles are showing beneath a ripped T-shirt, and he speaks in a Scottish-American drawl. He pioneered the method of descending from a chopper on wires onto a moving glacier to measure its melting drip by drip.

The broader picture
ABOVE Inuit children discover the disposable camera
TOP Ilulissat harbour with the icebergs that sail past it

"Very few scientists ever get a Eureka moment," he says, but it happened to him, here. In 2005 he sailed out in a boat to measure how far the glaciers – the great tributaries by which the ice sheet breaks up and flows into the ocean – were retreating. He was expecting some retraction to have happened, probably a few percent, in the year since it had last been monitored. Arriving at the spot, he assumed with irritation that he had written the GPS co-ordinates down wrong. "When we got there, there was no glacier to be seen." He checked everything; this was the right place. The glacier had vanished. Far up the fjord, he found its depleted corpse, churning out icebergs. "The glacier really had undergone this enormous change. We were in awe."

There are only 17 glaciers that regulate 80% of the ice that comes off the ice sheet. Each one matters – and most are receding like this one, biting deep into the ice. It is agreed that it will take thousands of years for the whole ice sheet to go, but there is so much water here that even if the ice sheet sheds 10% of it, the map of the world will change dramatically. This process has already begun. In 2007, the melt-rate was the most severe since records began: the area experiencing surface melt has increased by 60% in just a decade.

On the basis of what he's recorded, Hamilton says: "I now expect a metre of sea-level rise this century." From this ice cap alone? "Yes." This is the consensus view of Arctic scientists. The latest report from the Arctic Climate Impact >

EDGAR ALLAN POE CALLED THE ARCTIC "THE RAMPARTS OF THE WORLD". HE DIDN'T KNOW HOW RIGHT HE WAS

Heading for oil riches?
Junior Greenlanders with a husky puppy

> Assessment team says bluntly: "Sea level will rise more than one metre by 2100, even more than previously thought, largely due to increased mass loss from the ice sheets." Hamilton says this would displace more than a billion people, and condemn whole states – from Bangladesh to Florida – to "disappearing from the map. You only need a metre…to screw up the world! Because almost all the world's mega-cities are at the coast."

As Hamilton reels off statistics about how this sick ice sheet will change our world, I find myself staring at it in the distance. Blue veins of deeper ice are showing through the snowy flesh. It occurs to me that humanity and the Arctic have traded places in less than a century. To the first Europeans to trudge into the Arctic, it was a vast indomitable force that could destroy us with an indifferent shrug of snow. Today, we are the vast incorrigible force, destroying it with an indifferent shrug of warming gases. It is the ice that should be standing in awe before us, because now we are bigger, and we are bringing it down, glacier by glacier – while we can.

In one of his short stories, Edgar Allan Poe called the Arctic the "ramparts of the world". He didn't know how right he was. These ramparts hold in the world's water; they hold up our great cities. They depend on this ice staying in this place. I walk away from my meeting with Professor Hamilton and watch the Inuit fishing in the harbour. What becomes of them? In the answer to this question there lies a strange twist in the tale of global warming – an ironic postscript that helps us understand how the story began. This melting is happening because, even after we knew the rock-solid scientific evidence, we couldn't stop ourselves burning oil and coal and gas. Because it is easy; because some people get very rich from our doing it. And now the victims themselves – the Inuit – may be about to buy into the system, just as the end-game begins.

As the ice recedes, fossil fuels that have been forever frozen away are becoming accessible for the first time. A quarter of all the undiscovered oil left on earth is below the Arctic ice, and slowly coming into view. The government of Greenland, and those in the rest of the Arctic, suddenly face a dilemma. Their culture, their world-view and their landscape is vanishing, yet they could gain unimaginable riches in return, at the cost of then warming the world even further.

This dilemma is made flesh in the form of Aleqa Hammond, the woman tipped by many as a future prime minister of Greenland. Currently the minister for families and justice, she is a fiercely intelligent, round-faced Inuit woman who sits upright and responds to questions with torrents of detail. As I sit in her office, she makes black coffee, and drinks it in great gulps. "I come from a hunting and fishing community," she says. "My grandmother was born on a dog-sled. We are born hunters, and we have it in our blood. Everybody hunts. I hunt. It's part of our understanding of what life should be. But because of climate change, we are having to rethink everything…For the first time ever, in the history of hunters, they have to come and beg for money from the government because they don't have money enough to make >

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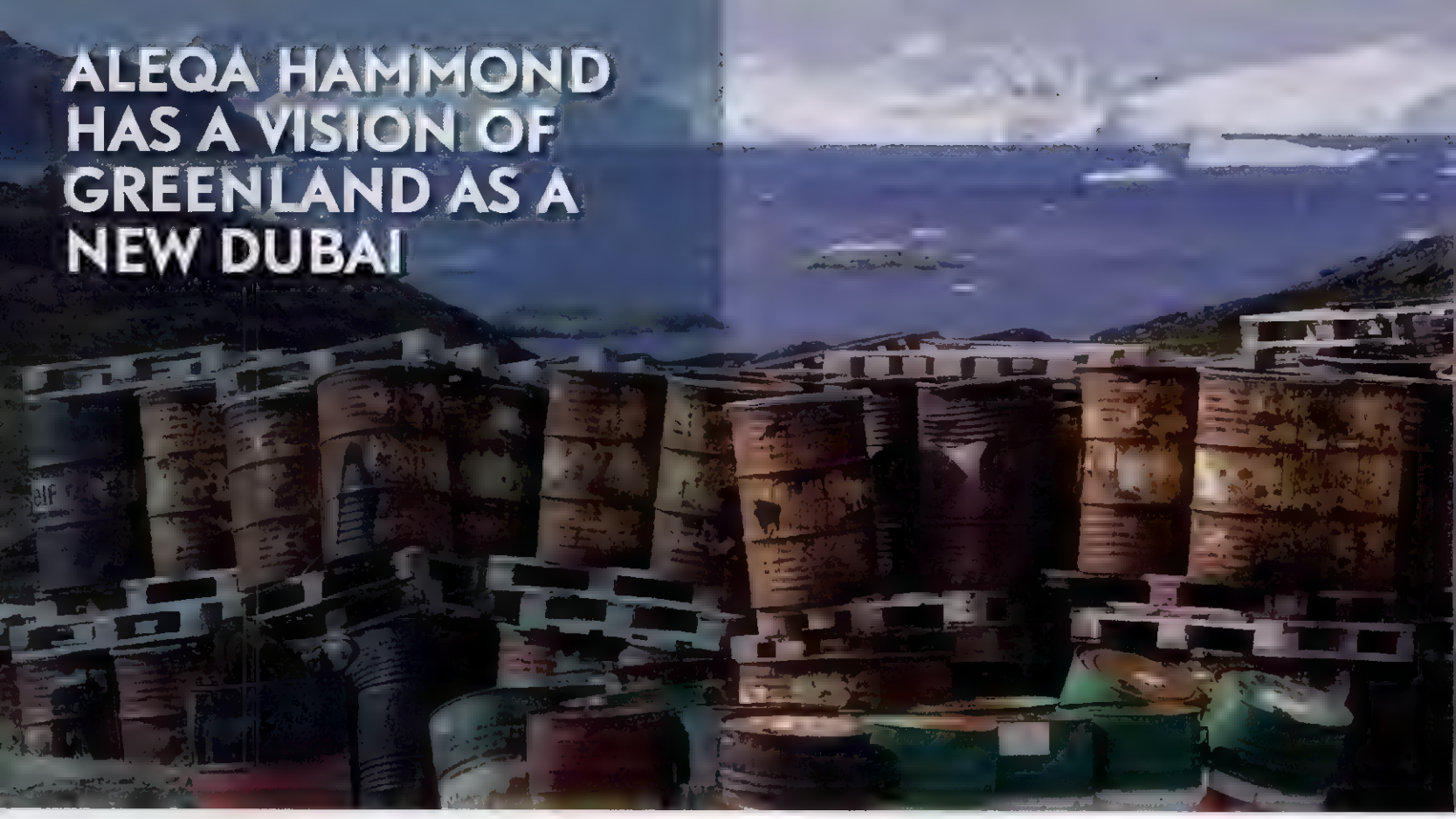
ALEQA HAMMOND HAS A VISION OF GREENLAND AS A NEW DUBAI



> a living." She says her uncle, "a great hunter", is lost in this thawing landscape.

And then her tone shifts. She leans forward, eyes alert. "If we are standing there, feeling sorry for ourselves, we can't gain anything. So, we have to think: what does [global warming] bring? Some places will lose everything, and I feel very bad for them, but we are not in that position. The retreating of the ice gives Greenlanders a greater survey of what the country contains – the riches. We know that there is oil in Greenland. You can touch it, you can feel it...Now there are companies around the world showing interest in it."

She begins to present a vision of Greenland as a new Dubai emerging from beneath the ice to power the final spurts of global warming. She stresses proudly that when Greenland negotiated self-rule from Denmark – starting in June 2009 – they made sure that the rights to profit from the new resources remained entirely with Greenlanders. "So, the economic interest now is absolutely of another level for us," she says, with a smile. But wouldn't it be a kind of madness to melt the Arctic with fossil-fuel emissions, and then see it as a great chance to burn even more fossil fuels? Her eyes – and suddenly evasive answers – seem to say: you are telling me you will melt our world with your emissions, and then shut us out of the last hours of the party? Greenland will, she says, demand looser restrictions at Copenhagen, so they can sell their oil.

This is the dilemma we all face now, albeit with a twist. Do we allow some people to profit, at the price of catastrophe for many more? The main beneficiaries up to now have been oil companies and Arab tyrannies. Can the Inuit join that list?

The future? Oil barrels meet icebergs in the Ilulissat fjord, a Unesco world heritage site

It is not a deal all of them are prepared to make. Aqqaluk Lynge, current head of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, is "very sceptical" about the notion that ordinary Inuit would benefit from oil exploration. He thinks it is naive, or worse. "We are already seeing conflict brewing between the great powers, with us in the middle," he says. The Russians have planted a flag on the Arctic sea bed in an early attempt to stake a claim to its oil. "Even Canada and the United States, two very close and friendly powers, are having big arguments about who has the rights to exploit parts of the Arctic. Do we want to start this kind of rush for oil? Why do we think there was a war in Iraq?" It is another irony that just as Greenland has broken free from colonial rule by Denmark, its fate may hinge on climate talks in Copenhagen.

Throughout the 19th century, Europeans came to the Arctic and blithely ignored the warnings of the Inuit. They chose to bring tinned food rather than feed on the local wildlife – so they sickened with scurvy. They chose to build tents rather than igloos – so they sickened with frostbite and pneumonia. They insisted on pulling their own sleds rather than using dogs – so they sickened with exhaustion.

The price of ignoring the warnings was death. Will we ignore them again now? "The Inuit helped guide some explorers who were prepared to listen, and because of us, they survived," Lynge says. "We would like to help guide you to survival again...Please – we don't have a lot of time." ■

CORBIS

DEFYING LOGIC
'No one has seen them,' claims Peru's oil chief. 'They've been invented,' says Peru's president. Yet this photograph of an uncontacted tribe proves they exist. The government is giving over 70% of its Amazon forest to oil and gas exploration. It will destroy the tribes that live there. Help restore logic.
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Survival

RISE OF THE POTENTIALIST

2009 has not only been a watershed year for the world economy, but also a defining moment for one of the world's leading payments firms - American Express - which celebrates its 160th birthday in 2010. On the back of a major new international advertising campaign - 'Realise The Potential' - Raymond Joabar, UK Managing Director, talks exclusively about the changing face of consumerism and the importance of self-fulfilment.

We began by asking what the inspiration was behind American Express' new campaign.

'Anticipating and responding to changes in our customers' behaviour is at the heart of everything we do. They're now aspiring to rounder, more enriching lives where success and happiness aren't just about getting that next promotion or owning the latest gadgets. Increasingly, what's important is personal improvement and self-fulfilment, grabbing life with both hands and making the most of every opportunity - hence the 'Realise The Potential' campaign. Backed up by research from The Future Laboratory, our insight shows that more than half of us are now investing in experiences that will bring value to our lives, such as travelling, learning a language or volunteering.'

This research has identified the emergence of a new group of consumers dubbed 'potentialists'. We were keen to learn more about this trend.

'These are consumers who are starting to re-evaluate their lives and invest in themselves or in what we are calling "Me Plc". Earning money and living comfortably is still important, but what we are seeing is a shift in behaviour, with more of our customers now wanting to learn new skills, try new experiences and spend more time with their families.'

And how does American Express help its customers to reach their potential?

'We give cardholders the confidence, time and peace of mind they need to get the most out of their lives. With our Cards we offer them access to money can't buy experiences. Like giving 50 music lovers the chance to attend a special masterclass with guitar legend Jeff Beck. Or arranging for fashionistas to go backstage during London Fashion Week. We've also recently partnered with the School of Life, which provides special courses helping people find self-fulfilment.'

As someone who has helped to identify this new consumer mindset, we wondered how Mr Joabar realises his own potential outside of work.

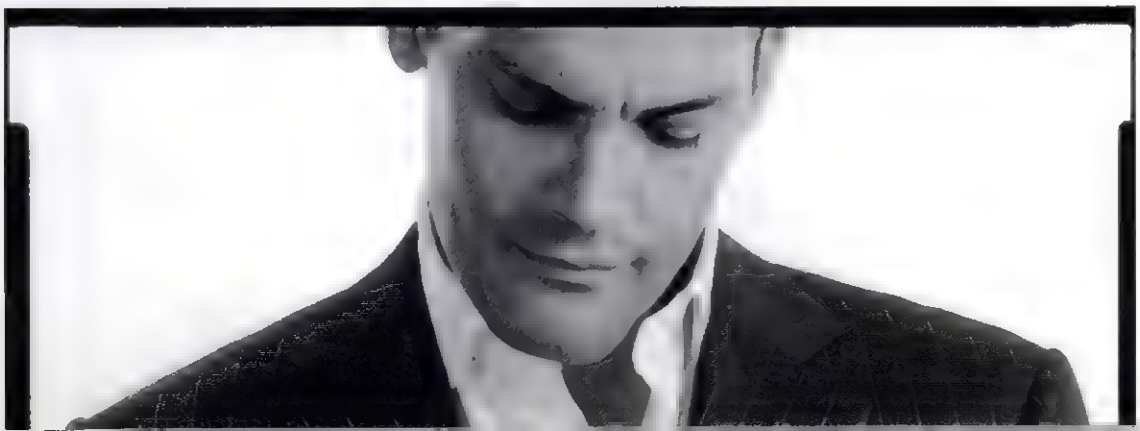
'While my job requires me to work long hours, I make sure I spend time with my family and pursue my hobbies – it's all about balance. I love running and have just completed my 3rd NYC marathon; I'm also an aspiring photographer and would love to exhibit one day. Aim high is my motto.'

When we touched upon the implications for companies, Mr Joabar gave a wry smile.

'They need to realise that customers want brands they can trust and service they can rely on, freeing them up to spend more time doing the things they want to do and that are important to them. Companies also need to reflect modern customer values and concerns, whether that's through strong corporate social responsibility policies or by fostering a good work/life balance for their people. Ultimately, consumers like to know that they are spending their money with companies that believe in the same things they do.'

It seems the time of the potentialists is upon us.

americanexpress.co.uk/potential



the man *in the* white shirt

At his best, Colin Firth is outstanding, as he shows in "A Single Man", for which he has already won an award. So why isn't he at his best more often? And how does he feel about Mr Darcy? ISABEL LLOYD asks him

EVERYONE KNOWS WHO Colin Firth is. He's Mr Darcy. He'll always be Mr Darcy, despite the gaggle of not-Firths who've attempted the part in the 15-odd years since Andrew Davies's dripping adaptation of "Pride and Prejudice". Darcy was Firth's high-water mark. Those rigid sideburns and burning eyes, that vulnerable mouth trapped between the points of a Regency collar, propelled him out of a wet shirt and into the fantasies of a million women, into the kind of fame where your name becomes shorthand for wholesome lust-object. Only recently, Monty Don acknowledged that he was the "Colin Firth of gardening".

It's a phenomenon that Firth observes as if he was his own audience. "That thing," he calls it, "that thing you're describing is...preposterous. The screen, the high profile, all that has an unnatural effect. Men my age [he's teetering on the edge of 50] don't get giggled over by a girl of 21." Well, no, mostly not. Still, when Firth came into the *Intelligent Life* office a few months ago, rings of excited female giggling rippled out across the floor. "What", asked a male colleague afterwards, "was so *funny*?"

For a man so loved by women, Firth is good at being gay. In 1983, aged 22, he launched his career on stage with Guy Bennett, the flamboyantly out proto-traitor of "Another Country". He's been wittily gay in "Relative Values", secretly gay in "Mamma Mia!". And in September, he was named best actor at the Venice film festival for his performance in "A Single Man", Tom Ford's first detour from fashion into film directing. Adapted from a Christopher Isherwood novella, the film follows a day in the life of George, an English lecturer in early-Sixties California who is grief-stricken by the death of his lover, Jim. It's the sort of part – intensely emotional, dealing with Issues – that Hollywood laps up, and there are murmurs of an Oscar nomination. Firth himself describes the role as "career Viagra". But when I ask where that particular dose of medicine might lead, he says, "I can only imagine I will continue as I always have. I don't see trajectories as being manageable. I don't see career ladders as dependable." It's a strangely downbeat answer.

There have been times before when he seemed about to leap up the ladder, if not shoot straight off into the galaxy: after his Royal Television Society award for the Falklands drama "Tumbledown" in 1988, after being cast as Valmont in Milos Forman's (sadly outgunned) version of "Les Liaisons Dangereuses" in 1989; after, of course, "Pride and Prejudice". >

STRATION KATHRYN RATHKE

> Yet every time Firth has got a toe on the top rung, he seems to pause and then slide down a passing snake. Did Mr Darcy have to be reduced to Bridget Jones's self-parodying Mark Darcy? Did the yearning Vermeer of "Girl with a Pearl Earring" have to be followed by the gurning father in "Nanny McPhee"? Compared with his peers from the extended drama-school graduation that was "Another Country" – Kenneth Branagh, Rupert Everett, Daniel Day-Lewis – Firth has spent much of his career apparently on the run from his own talent. Why?

THE SECOND TIME I meet Colin Firth, it's away from the office and the giggling. He's doing promotion for "A Single Man" in the inevitable hotel room in central London, and is dressed for a long day of press duty: sludgy-grey long-sleeved T-shirt, dark jeans, heavy black-rimmed glasses that may be an actor's affectation (halfway through the interview he whips them off, the better to make eye contact and press home a point). Again, he's likeable company, quick-witted and entertaining; but he's both more considered and more eager to please than before, when he sat back and enjoyed being the centre of the room.

We start with the film. How did Tom Ford, a fashion designer who in the past had only ever shot perfume ads, compare as a director with others Firth has worked with – Richard Eyre, say, or Michael Winterbottom?

He's off straight away, leaning forward into the question, sincere and pleased. His face is jowlier, slacker than in his Darcy days, and his unruly schoolboy hair – the sort that mothers want to ruffle – is mousey shot with grey. But his body is still trim, tall, light-boned, with a near-sculptural ratio of shoulder to waist to hip. You can see why Ford liked him: an actor who looks so good in a white shirt, wet or dry, is a gift to a director best known for his tailoring.

"Tom does everything with incredible simplicity," he says. "There's a kind of economy in the way he works his magic. Everything is taken care of in an almost surgical way, which means you don't have to worry about anything. He carves out this enormous space for you to work in."

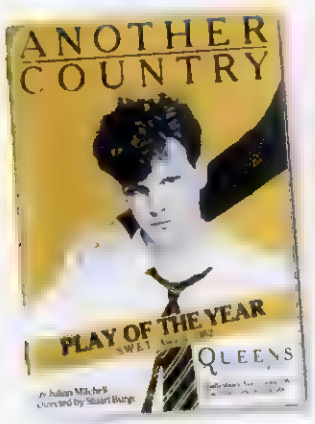
Did he have no concerns that with Ford adapting, funding and directing, the film was an oversized vanity project?

This isn't a question expecting a straight answer, but it gets one. "Before I met him, yes. But when we did meet, Tom intrigued me. You can't not be intrigued – for a start, he's an extraordinarily beautiful man. And he has this way of staring at you, it's not eyeing you up, exactly, it's more..." He trails off. "I felt he was a man not to be underestimated."

He has a point, up to a point. "A Single Man" is a beautiful film. Too beautiful to be true. In Isherwood's original, George lives alone and uncared for in a shabby, ivy-smothered house over a falling-down bridge; there are ants in the jam and the doorways are too small for two people to pass through. In Ford's version, the house is a polished arena of glass and dark wood, where every hand-towel is folded, every coffee cup has a matching saucer; George has a housekeeper who adores him, and a bathroom filled with carefully aligned grooming products. Throughout, the dinginess and failure of Isherwood's mocking, loving original is transformed into an ad-land fantasia, full of pouty-perfect girls and pink-lipped, speedwell-eyed boys. Where in the original George lusts hopelessly after a gangling, gormless student, in Ford's world this youth – and everyone else he comes into contact with, from female secretaries and bank clerks to James Dean-lookalike hustlers – fancies him rotten, instantaneously. This, you think, is what it's like being Tom Ford, not what it was like being George.

That the film works at all is down to Firth. In one extraordinary scene, George receives a phone call telling him first that his lover has been killed in a car crash, and then that the family will not welcome him at the funeral. The camera holds Firth in close-up for the length of the phone call and beyond, feeding on every detail of his reaction – a sideways flickering of the eyes, a tiny tremble of the top lip, a catch in the pace and depth of his breath. As he puts down the receiver, you feel the shock, the loss and the rejection roll over you just as it all rolls over George; it's almost unbearable. This is acting pyrotechnics, just the kind of skilled display that wins awards.

The best...



Roles with emotional depth show the subtlety Firth is capable of. From left: sulking as Guy Bennett in "Another Country", trembling and stuttering in "A Month in the Country", smouldering as Darcy in "Pride and Prejudice", and showing a complicated grief in "And When Did You Last See Your Father?"

But there's a greater, subtler achievement. Despite the gloss that Ford brushes over everything, despite the plodding plotlessness of the storytelling, Firth has still managed to capture the George that Isherwood created. Read the book, then watch the film, and the man is there: troubled, vain, lustful, battered, removed, wry, alone. Yes, there are one or two moments when Firth is almost outshone by his "Dressed by Tom Ford" suits – I kept getting distracted by his perfect cuff-buttons in the lecture-room scene – but a lesser actor would have been straitjacketed by them.

If there's clearly a lot of Ford in the super-buff surfaces of the film, is there much of Firth in its depths? "I don't know," he says. "I wouldn't know how to deconstruct [my performance] that way. Also it would mean getting into territory where I would be talking about myself in ways that a) I wouldn't know how to and b) I wouldn't want to, even if I did know how. I only know there must be something of me in there because George does still resonate. It doesn't often happen, but this one really haunted me."

He's been haunted before, in particular by Robert Lawrence, the real, young, terribly damaged Falklands veteran he played in "Tumbledown". Lawrence – who had had a third of his brain shot away by a sniper – was on set throughout filming; in the past Firth has called him, with an artist's practical callousness, "a goldmine, an articulate soldier who will talk". But his rendering of the man was anything but callous, switching from brusque nah-yah poshness in the early days to thick-tongued, bloody and bolshie survivor. The scene where he recites a feverish, repetitive litany of the dead to his mother as blood leaks out of him over the hospital pillow is a small masterpiece of understanding; there's not a dram of melodrama in it, though most actors would have been fatally tempted to play to the tear-ducts.

"That one really did hang around," he says. "Constantly. I dreamt about him." Has he followed the stories of other veterans, in other wars since? "Yes, but I'm not a member of organisations. It's not an area that I think I'm of much help. My instinct, though, is there should be another film made, about Lawrence now. There is an interesting story about veterans 20 years on that should be told. And you've got the same actor, the same age as him. We've still got footage from 20 years ago. Goodness only knows what sort of post-modern trickery you could do...a weird reflexive film within a film idea..."

Firth has become very animated. His body language has changed, his gestures have expanded, and he's smiling – not at me, but to himself, excited by the idea he has just had. You sense that Firth is in the thrall of ideas: during our conversation he quotes Martin Amis and Graham Greene, self-consciously but accurately, and he speaks like one who cares about words, rolling out full sentences with a subject, an object and, as often as not, a punchline.

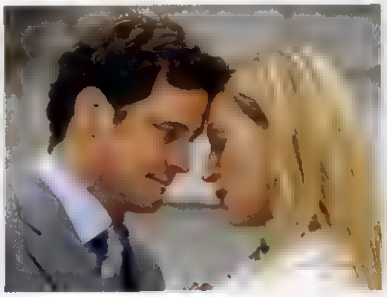
Firth clearly enjoys making people laugh. Perhaps a little too much. He often uses jokes as a way of dodging proper answers, to stop you pinning him down. He's good at sidesteps. In a past interview, he admitted that "the thought of my children losing me, of me dying, disturbs me greatly." It was a touching moment, this admission that his children's potential grief grieves him. But then he segued straight into: "Personally, I'm not afraid of dying, I just don't want to be there when it happens. That's Woody Allen."

And when I ask him to describe how he approached a particular role, he smiles charmingly and says: "Actors always sound terrible when we talk about our work as if it's something serious. We have to be very careful to be frivolous with our comments."

Look up Firth's name in a casting director's address-book, and you'd find it under "A" for Archetypal Englishman. He has played the comedy version (the cuckolded, tongue-tied writer in "Love Actually"), the villainous version (a Blackadderish lord in "Shakespeare in Love") and the subtle, smarter-than-he-first-appears version – decent Clifton, the young buffer who's actually a spy, in "The English Patient". Yet in reality Firth doesn't have much time for England.

Both his major relationships have been with women >

...and the rest



While never bad, in light comedy he's often indifferent. From left: mocking himself in "Bridget Jones's Diary", having nothing to do in "The Accidental Husband", gurning in "Nanny McPhee", and singing, arguably, in "Mamma Mia!"

KOBAL, IDS REX RONAL DEGANT

> from other countries – first the Canadian actress Meg Tilly, with whom he has a son, and now his wife Livia Guggioli, an Italian documentary producer and mother of his two younger children. Although from seven onwards he lived in the suburbs of Winchester, the childhood memories he most often refers to in public are of Nigeria, where he lived until he was four. And he says now that he doesn't feel "very planted" in England; though he has a home in west London, he lived with Livia in Italy for a couple of years and still spends as much time as possible there. It's a country he clearly adores; he says it has "inundated me with gifts".

His Englishness may actually be something of the colonial. Two of his grandparents were missionaries. His mother grew up in India and America, his father grew up in India, his sister was born in Nigeria and married an Indian. He says that the "typical Englishman" he portrays is "rather difficult to come across in reality. You're not likely to run into Mr Darcy anywhere." Firth is the sort of Englishman who exports an idea of Englishness to the rest of the world, and is never that happy once back at home. Misses the heat, you know, the smells, the chance to be something other.

There's also the suburbs, the common denominator for Firth and his friend Nick Hornby. "I'm a secondary-modern-educated white suburban male," he says. "So something really chimed with me when I read 'Fever Pitch'. Nick was the same generation and grew up in Maidenhead, which is exactly like where I grew up, and what really resonated was this idea that boys from the suburbs don't have any roots. You step out of school and into a cultural void. There's no music from your part of the world that makes you want to weep into your beer. There's been no artistic revolution or sacrifice. One ends up casting around for credentials of some kind, claiming some sort of Celtic blood, yearning to be a Delta bluesman – or in Nick's case, Charlie George [the 1970s footballer]. I may be English, but my sensibilities reside in Rome. I may be middle-class, but my granny comes from Brum. Anything just to give yourself a bit of substance."

Perhaps "Another Country" gave Firth the substance he was looking for. After playing Bennett on stage, he switched to Judd, his polar opposite, in the film: puffy-haired, conker-eyed, Communist, curt. The only actor ever to look hot in a grey tank-top, he also nailed a certain kind of public schoolboy, the sort with a soft heart beneath the stiff(ish) upper lip. He's not, by his own admission, remotely upper-class, but so much success, so young, at playing it must have been seductive. His CV since only appears to show one descent into the lower orders: a Nottinghamshire miner in D.H. Lawrence's "The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd". The BBC broadcast it at the same time as "Pride and Prejudice"; it might have played in a coal-hole for all the notice anyone took.

Whether by choice or accident, he kept getting cast in high-status roles. Some were more successful than others. His Valmont, which appeared in cinemas a year after John Malkovich's sinuous version of the same character in "Dangerous Liaisons", had the right louche self-regard, but lacked the fatal cruelty necessary to motor the plot. The mix of confusion, tenderness and horror in Valmont's face as he falls precipitously in love with Meg Tilly's Mme de Tourvel is utterly compelling; but his rape of 15-year-old Cecile is a mere pantomime of nastiness.

That might be because you can't see his eyes. Firth uses his face like a version of the old showbiz command: "Eyes and teeth, darling! Eyes and teeth!" Except for him it's "eyes and no teeth". The biggest surprise on meeting him in the flesh is the rabbitiness of his overbite; once you've spotted it, though, you can see how he uses it. If he pulls his upper lip up to reveal the prominent upper teeth – the source of that slightly fruity lisp – he becomes a comical Englishman, a force no longer to be reckoned with. When he needs to be handsome, he keeps his top lip down and dips his chin slightly. His mouth then looks like it was drawn on a Marvel-era superhero: a flattened w with a tick underneath, visual shorthand for reliability, strength, inner torment. And above it are his eyes.

Women often coo about the softness, the intensity of the Firth gaze. In reality, his eyes are greeny-hazel, much lighter than they appear on screen, where they often read as bumblebee brown. And this could be the core of his appeal. Contrary to the press clippings, the sexiest scene in "Pride and Prejudice" was not the clambering out of a pond in a wet shirt but the moment when Darcy first sees – really sees, as opposed to snobbishly dismissing – Jennifer Ehle's Elizabeth Bennet. Watching her as she crosses a room, his eyes first widen, then go black with desire. This is surely because his pupils enlarged as he looked at her. When asked how to "act sexy", he has said it was very simple: "You just look completely and totally at the other person." What indeed is more attractive for most women than being the object of a man's undivided attention?

And what most women can't understand is why, when they were enjoying themselves so much, he didn't go on doing it. Post-Darcy, Firth's career has shown an almost wilful refusal to settle, zig-zagging around like a hen in a farmyard, taking a peck of thriller here, a peck of romcom there–and playing a whole passel of the cuckolded, the stiff and the sexually unsuccessful. He's now almost as well-known for stuffed shirts as white shirts. Was that because he didn't want to take on Darcy's love-god mantle?

"Probably. But I didn't go round thinking 'I don't want it'. I've been presented as someone who resented and resisted it, or was reluctant. It wasn't like that. It was more that I thought maybe I needed not to pursue it. To try other things."

This is his most incoherent moment; he's struggling to name something. Because, I ask, "it" was overwhelming? Because it was boring?

The answer snaps straight back. "Because it was bor-

ing. There is nothing you can do with it."

Well, perhaps he was right. He had, he has, the potential to be an outstanding actor, a true star (his old drama teacher once said he could be "another Paul Scofield"). And you can see that a lively mind would quickly tire of tall, dark and handsome: as with Clive Owen, the danger is of getting a kind of repetitive smoulder injury, where all you end up being allowed to do is glower at beauties. But his fear of being trapped may have led him down a different cul-de-sac, one where he daren't display his own ability too openly. How else – other than needing the money – do you explain "Mamma Mia!", "The Accidental Husband", even, saints preserve us, "St Trinian's"? One *and* two.

Certainly he displays an odd ambivalence about his career. "I generally feel I've done work I've been proud of", he says, "in films I'm not particularly proud of. Conversely, sometimes I feel I've been the weak link in something that was otherwise very good." Could he give an example? "No – I don't want to draw attention to either." Is there nothing he'll admit to being pleased with? "There are things; the further back in history, the less I feel that was me and the more I can be objective about it. 'Tumbledown'. 'A Month in the Country'."

This was Pat O'Connor's 1987 film of a J.L. Carr novel about two first-world-war veterans finding the beginnings of redemption in the Yorkshire countryside, and it is something of a lost gem. Firth and an equally young Kenneth Branagh give performances of complex maturity in a spare piece that is as much about silence as the words that break it. In that respect, it resembles the script for "A Single Man", which Firth says he found attractive precisely because it was "not about dialogue – there were a lot of empty spaces that the actor was going to have to fill".

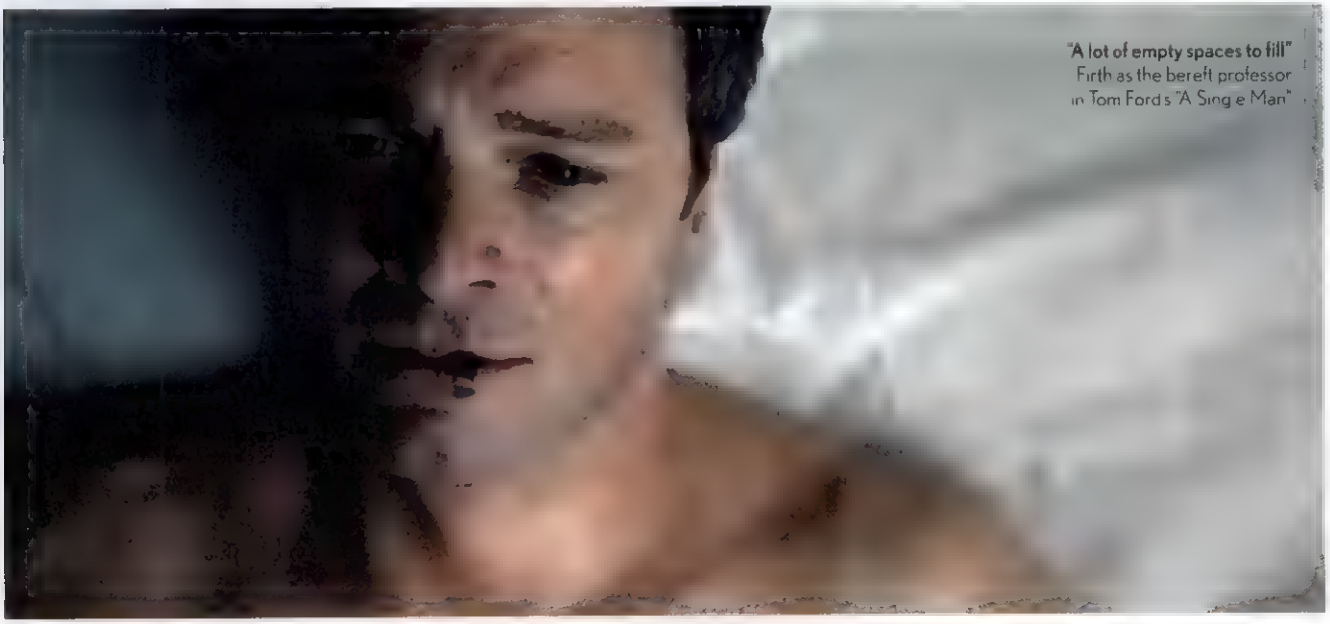
He's also on record as approving of "Shakespeare in Love". Is that because the script is so smart? "Well, no, I thought it was intellectually very robust, but my fear was that it was going to be a pantomime for clever clogs, that it didn't have any heart. And of course it turned out to be the most wonderfully romantic film. But then I have an absolutely flawless capacity to get things wrong. It's quite extraordinary. If you want to bet on the horses, or the US elections, before going to Ladbrokes, get me to call it and then bet the other way. It never fails."

Perhaps that's why he keeps doing comic turns in tragically bad films. Firth is perfectly acceptable as a light entertainer, though occasionally lazy: he's not above substituting camp – an arched eyebrow, a moue, a clunking double-take – for comedy. But there's no comparison with what he is capable of in serious roles. He seems quite happy doing the lesser stuff; in fact he seems to need it. When I ask if he'd mind if he was banned from ever doing another light comedy, he says: "Initially I'd be fine, I'd be pretty happy. But I think it would get to me in the end. My sanity probably depends on my being able to send myself up."

Is he right? In career terms, sending himself up seems to have dragged him down. But work isn't just about work. When he was 27 and cast as Valmont – at the time, the male equivalent of bagging Scarlett O'Hara – a good friend gave him some advice. " 'If it all kicks off,' he said, 'don't lose your sense of the ridiculous, your sense of fun. Keep your sense of the absurd.' It was a piece of advice that's stuck with me." He says he uses his family and friends as "balloon prickers", a kind of absurdity police who pop his ego whenever it's in danger of overinflating. "They could ease up a bit, actually," he says.

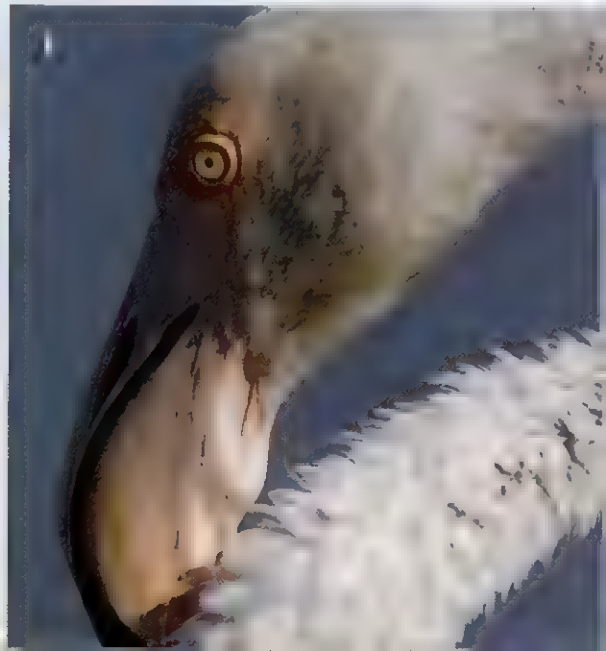
Joke, joke. It's another of those sidesteps. But when you watch "A Single Man", or remember Robert Lawrence, you can't help wishing Colin Firth would take himself more seriously, more often. ■

A Single Man opens in Britain on February 12th



"A lot of empty spaces to fill" Firth as the bereft professor in Tom Ford's "A Single Man"

PARISSELECT



CAPTURING THE CAMARGUE

WITH THE CANON EOS 7D

The Camargue has a haunting beauty like few other places on earth. One of Europe's largest river deltas, its primitive mesh of reed-beds and waterways is an area of vital biological diversity. Here, white horses run free through the saltwater lagoons, indigenous black bulls wander beneath massive skies and pink flamingos flock in their thousands.

With more than four hundred different species of bird in residence, the Camargue is a wildlife photographer's dream – but also one that poses a series of unique challenges. These quickly became apparent when award-winning photographer and marine biologist Fergus Kennedy set out to chronicle the area during a five-day shoot using the Canon EOS 7D.

1 The right choice of camera means the best choice of shot...

'Photographing flamingos requires skill, patience and the ability to focus on those elements that best bring a shot to life. The superb resolution of the EOS 7D's 18MP CMOS sensor gives so much detail that I always have the flexibility to crop into the shots to choose the ones that most powerfully capture the scene.'

2 Fast continuous shooting...

'A camera that is fast, reliable and responsive is vital to capture images of the iconic white horses – the EOS 7D allows me to shoot detailed 18MP 14-bit images at 8fps as standard.'

3 Working from dawn till dusk...

'A smaller marsh presents opportunities for photographing herons, egrets, waders and terns in the vivid dawn light. The high ISO rating of the EOS 7D which offers ISO speeds of up to 6400 makes it possible to work in low light conditions without a tripod.'

4 Filming subjects on the move...

'Aerial photography from a microlight allows me to capture pink flocks of flamingos moving across an ethereal watery green backdrop. It's the perfect opportunity to try out the camera's impressive 1080p HD movie recorder – that even includes selectable frame rates and full manual control.'

5 A natural view...

'The presence of beavers, wild boar, tree frogs, water snakes and terrapins gives the chance to take more traditional shots. The EOS 7D's 1.0x magnification viewfinder allows 100% coverage and the reassurance of knowing that whatever I see in the viewfinder will end up in the final photograph.'

To see the rest of Fergus Kennedy's stunning photographs and learn more about how the EOS 7D helped him capture the Camargue, visit www.canon-europe.com/takestories

CANON EOS 7D KEY FEATURES

- 18 Megapixel APS-C Canon CMOS sensor
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- iFCL metering system with 63-zone Dual-Layer sensor
- Dual "DIGIC 4" processor for natural colour and noise control
- Full HD 1080p movie shooting with manual control and selectable frame rates
- 3" Clear View II LCD - effective even in bright sunlight
- Integrated Speedlite Transmitter
- Environmentally protected magnesium alloy body
- Optional Wireless File Transmitter compatible with GPS and External HDD

Images of Fergus by Julien Grignon
All other images by Fergus Kennedy

LONDON FOR LONERS

Big cities by day can become all too familiar. But on Sunday nights in winter, even sights you know well can turn into something strange and new. A photo essay by PETER KINDERSLEY

The Barbican
Kindersley shot this panorama by climbing to the cordoned-off space on top of one of the residential towers. "Unusually for me, it was early evening. The light faded rapidly and I wanted to catch the amazing luminescent sky with the glitter of tiny lights below. I felt as if I was in a low-flying aeroplane"

LATE ON SUNDAY nights in winter, when most of us are tucked up in bed, Peter Kindersley is to be found prowling London's back streets with his camera, looking for pictures to add to his series, "Details of London by Night". He has been at it for four years. "I have a huge map of London on my wall," he says. "I like to pick out an area I don't know and drive around it to see what I can find to photograph. I'm looking for a side of London that we don't normally see. Occasionally I catch sight of something, a view or just the atmosphere of a place, which communicates its loneliness or emptiness."

His images show an eerily still, almost sculptural city, wrapped in mists and delicate light. Many have a faint tenderness hovering about the edges, a wistfulness beneath the surface which seems to comment on the human condition.

Kindersley, aged 31, is the grandson of the late lettercutter David Kindersley, who designed the gates for the British Library. He has lived in London for 15 years, and spends his days on commercial and editorial work – he has done shoots ranging from the Army to Neal's Yard Remedies, as well as portraits and reportage for a number of magazines. But his passion lies in these nocturnal hibernal excursions.

At night, when the light is at its most elastic and pliant, the urban world wears a veil, revealing unexpected outlines and perspectives. Kindersley is not the first to have discovered this. Brassai made a celebrated series of photographs of Paris by night, and Bill Brandt, whose work has been a great influence on Kindersley, published "London at Night" in 1936. But the trick still works. Kindersley's lens transforms a familiar city into a phantom world with its own mysterious moods.

He is drawn to London's history: he likes reading Pepys and is fascinated by Hogarth. "I'm always looking out for those run-down old buildings that could have featured in Hogarth's paintings," he says. "Modern skyscrapers tend to protrude out of those gritty old back streets in central London. The documenting of that has become an ongoing obsession. It's a constant reminder of the evolution of the city."

Tracing the breadth and depth of his chosen neighbourhoods, Kindersley's unprejudiced eye fixes on angles >

> and views that few of us notice amid the clutter of our daily lives. He gives value to the slightest things, so that a council-estate car park or an ivy-covered trellis becomes as deserving of respect as Tower 42 (the former NatWest tower) or the London Eye. His glimpses are both inviting and sinister.

"Night photographs can bring out things you can't see with the naked eye," he says. "London's night skies in winter can be wonderful, full of light and contrast. These photographs need very long exposures and sometimes the traces of slow moving cloud can give them a strange surreal look." He prefers not to include people in his photographs, but sometimes, after printing, he discovers somebody in a shot, like the solitary man doing the washing-up in an upstairs room of a house in Blackheath.

The oddities of night light produce an alluring patina of rich luminous browns and milky greys, washed with orange street light. "A place that is bulging and clamouring with people during the day, like Petticoat Lane Market, takes on a magical feeling when shot at night," Kindersley says. "These are my intimate moments with the city. Each photograph is like a trace of a lost world." – JOANNA PITMAN

Left Silvertown
Kindersley spotted this view of London ancient and modern (the O2 Arena and Canary Wharf) late one night. The Victorian building was in near-darkness and he didn't know what he had been standing on until he developed the picture

Above Battersea
The celebrated chimneys of the power station are seen from a deserted side street with a pub on the corner. The orange glow from the street lights makes a strong wash which infiltrates everything, even the cracks in the pavement

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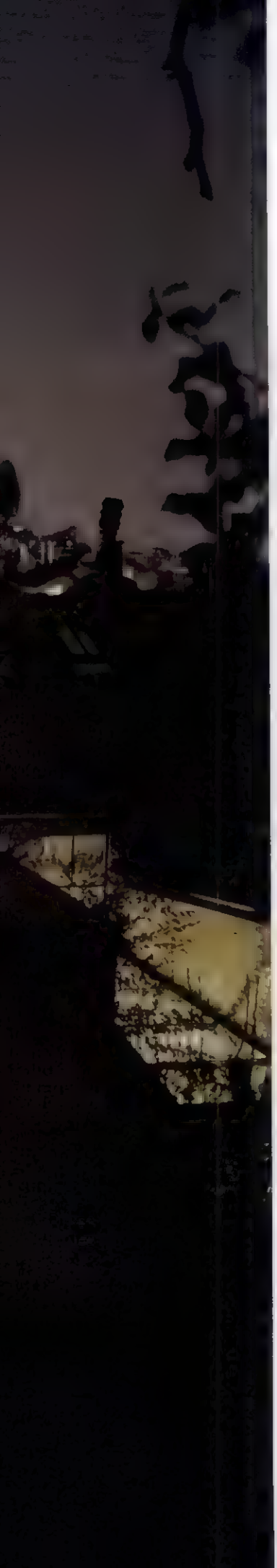
Left Petticoat Lane
This eerily blue shot of shuttered shops and empty market stalls was taken around midnight on a Sunday. "I found the empty stalls fascinating," Kindersley says. "They reminded me of the bones of skeletons abandoned on the street"

Above Off Brick Lane
This image lures the eye in, to the car parked at the end of the alley and Norman Foster's Gherkin, which seems to grow out of the mist. London's architecture is constantly evolving: this view has already changed

Above **Docklands**
Driving through the more derelict bits of Docklands, Kindersley found this bizarre view of a mass of satellite dishes. From the angle he has chosen, it's as if they are growing like enormous sci-fi vegetables, a sharp contrast with the mundane ordinariness of the two blocks of flats

Right **Lambeth**
This view of a council-estate car park, with its arched entrance framing the distant London Eye, is one many of us might miss as we scuttle past. Kindersley stopped, looked and relished the wiggling yellow lines and the sight of the Eye lit up as if with Christmas lights

NO PARKING

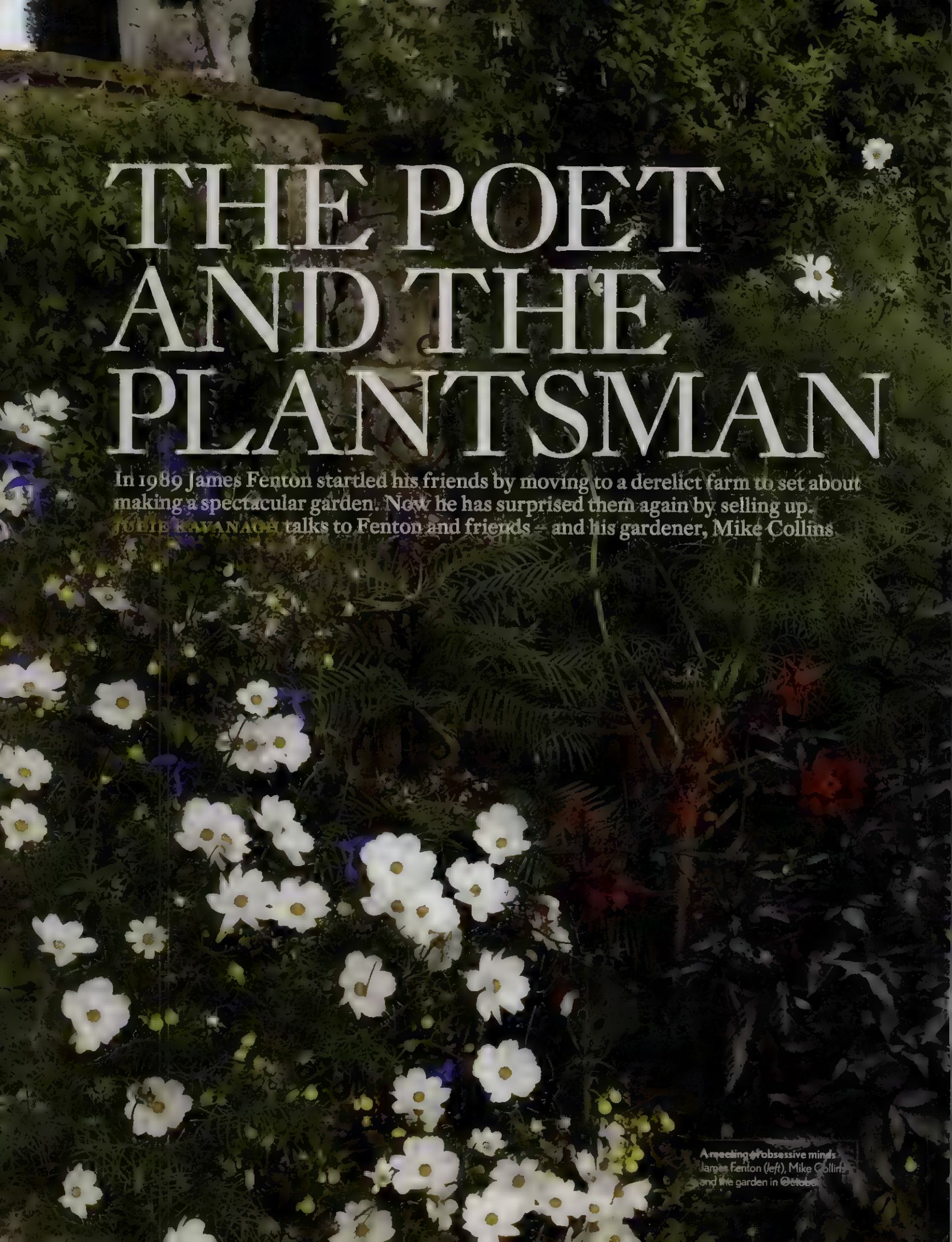


Left **Blackheath**
A midnight walk along the edge of Blackheath delivered this shot. "I was walking carefully along a pitch black path, holding onto the rail, and I came across this house still lit up. I wanted to show Victorian housing contrasting with the modernity of Canary Wharf. I only discovered the man washing up in the upstairs window after I printed the image"

Above **Moorgate**
This was one of the first night shots Kindersley made of London. Taken in Moorgate, it draws the eye from a sleepy passageway towards the monumental buildings of the City. The long exposure intensifies the colours, giving the humdrum buildings in the foreground a sculptural feel that allows them not to be outshone

THE POET AND THE PLANTSMAN

In 1989 James Fenton startled his friends by moving to a derelict farm to set about making a spectacular garden. Now he has surprised them again by selling up. JULIE KAVANAGH talks to Fenton and friends – and his gardener, Mike Collins



A meeting of obsessive minds: James Fenton (*left*), Mike Collins and the garden in October

TWENTY YEARS AGO James Fenton, looking for somewhere near Oxford to make a garden, bought a derelict farm with a hundred acres of land. About five miles out, south-facing with an established orchard, it was just what he wanted. His friends, on the other hand, thought he'd gone crazy. Fenton's poems were born of a vivid engagement with life – the memory of war and children in exile – and he was as much a man of action as of letters. He had reported from the front line in Cambodia and Vietnam, ridden a tank during the fall of Saigon, and survived months in the Borneo jungle with the explorer Redmond O'Hanlon. So why settle for a mid-life of rural domesticity?

Long Leys Farm was no pastoral idyll. The outbuildings were in ruins, a monstrous pylon delivering Swindon's electricity supply loomed over the grounds, and the orchard was barricaded against apple-pinching kids with old bicycles, tyres and rusty buckets. Fenton's friend Ian McEwan, the novelist, called it Scene of the Crime Farm: "It was a windswept, bleak stretch of open land and one of the barns had a rotting car inside. It looked like the kind of location a body might be found in an advanced state of decomposition and I earnestly advised James not to buy it. I told him he should look for an old vicarage somewhere."

Fenton, however, was undaunted. "I'd been living in a house built in the middle of a mangrove swamp," he says, referring to the period when he was the *Independent* correspondent in the Philippines. "If I was homesick, I used to read Anna Pavord's gardening column and it got me thinking that when I went back to England I'd find somewhere I could make a garden." That somewhere turned out to be Long Leys Farm, which has since become a plantsman's Utopia – "a great collection" according to the gardening writer Robin Lane Fox – with rarities that draw collectors from as far afield as America.

Fenton's dream was funded by an unlikely windfall. He had been commissioned to write the libretto for the musical of "Les Misérables", and although his version was not used, his agent, Pat Kavanagh (my late half-sister), negotiated a rejection fee of 0.5% of the box-office receipts. In less than a decade "Les Mis" grossed £600m in 22 countries and Fenton, a one-time Trotskyite with an indifference to possessions, found himself a seriously wealthy man.

On a warm May day in 1994, when he was about to be >

PHOTOGRAPHS: CHARLIE HOPKINSON

> elected as Oxford's professor of poetry, Fenton threw a party in the grounds of Long Leys Farm. By now a library had been built on what used to be the hen house; a laburnum walk underplanted with forget-me-nots had begun to make a canopy, and the assembled authors and academics could stroll into the rose garden and marvel at the wealth of varieties (250 in all) just coming into flower. Redmond O'Hanlon told the *New Yorker* that he could imagine undergraduates taking a taxi out to Fenton's estate to read their poems in the evening light. "They'll think: One more stanza, and all this could be mine."

Fenton's garden was not just a rich man's whim. As theatre critic of the *Sunday Times*, he had lived in a terraced house in Oxford and grown vegetables on a nearby plot. "I loved my allotment and the other allotments around me," he later wrote, "the immaculate working-class ones with their strict ratios of potato to onion to cabbage, the middle-class ones with their inefficient weeding, their courgettes and sweetcorn, their wigwams of climbing beans." The allotment inspired his book "A Garden from a Hundred Packets of Seeds" (2001), which makes a case for "neglected" bedding plants by advocating an annual, spontaneous approach to flower-planting. "Why should I not feel, this January, the same freedom as my pea epicurean, my marrow-maniacal friend?"

As he planned Long Leys, Fenton asked a gardening friend, Philip Dennis, to come up with a simple layout. In print he is virulent about the drawing-board aspect of gardening, placing snide inverted commas round "landscaped" or "features" such as paving and ponds, and dismissing formal design as a "terrible, stupid and expensive tyrant". To Fenton, a blaze of morning glories on a New York fire escape or orchids hung from the eaves in coconut husks in the Filipino barrios had as much right to be admired as great estates like Powis Castle or Versailles. But Dennis convinced him that some kind of plan was essential, and he even came round to the idea of a pond and an island. "Philip's inspiration was essentially Sissinghurst," Fenton says. "He gave me a terrific start, but we fell out about the way things should go on." Then his builder recommended a garden-contracting business whose owner was eventually persuaded to work for Fenton full-time. This was the dedicatee of "A Hundred Packets of Seeds", Michael Collins, "without whom there would be no garden".

COLLINS, WHO HAD been trained in basic techniques at Blenheim Palace, took on the physical side of the job while Fenton devoured books and articles. "To begin with we were level-pegging, but at some point Mike completely overtook me." Given a lavish budget and a near-free rein, Collins gathered a taxonomist's knowledge of flora, tracking down rare native orchids and growing exotic ferns from spores, such as the Resurrection variety, which curls up and plays dead in the desert, only to unfurl when it rains. "It was thrilling to watch him making himself a real expert," says Fenton. "Before long I had lost track of what was in the garden. I think only Mike really knows. Visiting other gardens, I seldom see things that we don't have."

In a notebook of mine are scrawled in hit-and-miss phonetic Latin the names of plants I've coveted at Long Leys. One page entitled "Wishlist 23 March 07" has ticks next to black Hellebore, Turkish bluebell and climbing Fritillary, and crosses after species Peony tomentosa, Tulipa cretica and Edgeworthia chrysantha (Japanese Daphne). A tick indicated a possibility I might acquire one of these beauties; a cross meant that they were so prized that there was no chance. For several years Collins, with Fenton's grudging blessing, agreed to moonlight in my garden for a few hours every Sunday, with me hanging on his every word. At other times I went to Long Leys for inspiration, lingering longest in the walled alpine area where there was always something startling in flower, regardless of the season. Most had been acquired from specialist nurseries, some skilfully propagated by Collins. Looking back, he says he learnt his plantsmanship fast. "But this was my only topic and James had hundreds of things on the go."

One was overseeing a modern extension by the architect Charles Barclay to bring the house up to the scale of the garden. With vast, ceiling-high windows overlooking raised beds and the fields beyond, it was designed to showcase a monumental Renaissance fireplace made for a mansion on Fifth Avenue, which Fenton had bought at auction in New York and shipped back. These overlapping interests began to reveal themselves in his writing – he would compare giant hogweed to Gothic fan vaulting – while the column he wrote for the *Guardian* skipped encyclopedically from Mughal paintings to

Long Leys in late flower
MAIN PICTURE Dahlias, Michaelmas daisies and salvias
RIGHT, TOP Hostas and ferns ABOVE Galanthus reginae

John Dowland's lute songs to polenta and piano exams. Then there were the books – poetry anthologies, opera libretti, a history of the Royal Academy…though there has been no collection of new poetry since "Out of Danger" in 1994. Fenton's Philippines years produced "Manila Envelope" (illustrated by Alex Garland, later to write "The Beach"), and the superb "The Milkfish Gatherers":

> They drag the shallows for the milkfish fry –
> Two eyes on a glass noodle, nothing more…

His garden hasn't directly inspired a single poem (the flowers in "Yellow Tulips" were bought from a shop). But Fenton's partner, the African-American writer and academic Darryl Pinckney, sees Long Leys infiltrating his work in all kinds of ways. "His selection of D.H. Lawrence and his garden poetry, the Oxford lectures which are very connected to the garden…A certain idea of Englishness goes with it. It's an intellectual setting for him, a place of contemplation – he's not there for countryside life. I'd look out the window and see James walking around and I could tell from the pace what he was working on – verse or prose."

Only a poet would savour the arcane vocabulary of horticulture with such relish: "monocarpic" (dies after flowering), "edaphic" (pertaining to the soil), "tomentose" (woolly underneath leaves). And the garden itself reflects the eclectic idiosyncrasy of Fenton's poetry, which is both English and cosmopolitan. Old English roses are underplanted with tropical gingers, and the flamboyant planting Fenton loved in the Philippines – "a shrieking fringe of cannas and a yelling assortment of bougainvilleas" – can be seen in beds where strident colours compete for attention. "Would Vita Sackville-West have approved? Or would she have thought it common?" Fenton playfully muses in a passage recommending plants that might have failed a taste test. His approach owes much to Christopher Lloyd, who made the celebrated garden at Great Dixter in Sussex and battled against the timid palette and "ghastly good taste" of so many gardens. "Lloyd's deployment of dahlias was a gesture of defiance."

To Mike Collins, who loves wild plants in their natural habitat, Fenton's insistence on Victorian bedding was unsettling. And that wasn't all. Collins had been taught to keep a garden in order, but Fenton loves "flowers that hop around". His signature plants carpeting the paving outside the kitchen door are hummocks of thrift, daisies and a viola called "Bowles Black" which have all been allowed to rampage. "Irrefutably black when grown in isolation," he has written, "it enjoys fooling around with other violas. Keen on bloodlines are we? Then we should 'rogue out' the less perfectly black seedlings. But to me the variations are all part of 'the music of what happens'."

"Isn't it lovely", Fenton said one day, "to see all those thyme seedlings coming up in the cracks?"

"It *was* lovely," replied Collins, who had conscientiously weeded them out.

"But once he understood," Fenton says, "everything followed from that."

There were setbacks. The laburnum walk Fenton had envisaged as "a gallery of dripping yellow, dazzling, fragrant and cool" was destroyed by honey fungus, and a member of Collins's family inadvertently sprayed all the roses with brushwood killer. "Mike was devastated and offered his resignation. But there wasn't a moment when I thought it was his fault."

This was a real partnership, and the two men's tastes began to merge. Collins spent four years growing the ginger Hedychium spicatum from seed he had collected on a hike in India, while a delicate spiralling orchid (*pictured overleaf*) that he'd tried nurturing in a raised bed to no effect now hops around outside the kitchen with the promiscuous violas. Fenton and Collins sparked in each other a compulsive passion for collecting. "Two obsessive minds met," says Robin Lane Fox. "Gardeners often hunt in pairs – Vita and Harold [Nicolson], Christopher Lloyd and Fergus [Garrett], Eric Young and Mr Moon. In Mike, James found the perfect partner." >

> It was Lane Fox who suggested creating a pair of raised iris beds, 25-feet long, but Fenton and Collins's combined craze for all Iridaceae soon took over. To sustain interest, they added spring crocuses to flower after the early reticulata irises, followed by hardy June irises. "By April", Fenton wrote, "the absurdly formal procession of the bearded irises begins in order of height: dwarfs first, tall fellows last. May, June and July are the periods of iris glut. In August the beds would turn orange, red and yellow as the crocosmias kick in, in their many varieties. September would see the first of the true autumn crocuses and these would carry the baton through to November."

Their other mutual obsession is snowdrops. "The initial interest was James's," Collins recalls. "But then galanthomania grabbed hold of me and now it won't let go."

"We snowdroppers call it 'galanthene' – it's like heroin," says Hitch Lyman, whose nursery in upstate New York has 450 different types. When Lyman visited Long Leys, he thought its collection "glorious", envying in particular the spread of Galanthus gracilis, a variety with twisted leaves from Asia minor, which is also Fenton's favourite. "Its name means graceful, and it is," Fenton says. "It seeded itself for us." Today, what began as a few clumps lifted from the borders has grown into a snowdrop collection worth, Collins reckons, hundreds of thousands of pounds.

Leaves out of his book
LEFT The ginger lily (Hedychium coccineum)
TOP Fenton in his shed
ABOVE The orchid spiranthes Chadd's Ford

IT WAS SOON after an open day at Long Leys in July that Fenton broke some dramatic news to Collins: the house and garden would have to be sold. "You have to do these things; say these things." There were a number of reasons why, led by the fact that Pinckney now teaches in New York and lives at their apartment in Washington Heights. For Collins, it was a shattering blow. The two decades at Long Leys "made my life actually," he says, "and I never really expected it to end." His professional relationship with Fenton had long since merged into friendship; when his marriage broke up he moved into the flat above the library, where he remains to this day. "It's been amazing to see," says Pinckney. "That sense of a real collaboration between them, as much as a *folie à deux*. Mike learnt something far beyond his schooling and really entered into the spirit of the place. It was a great wonder and a joy to James; as an old leftie, this was his thing. He used his fortune to employ people and change their lives."

At Long Leys in October there was a touch of bleakness about the house with some of the bookshelves standing empty and 80 packing cases already filled. The garden, however, was flourishing. The border planted for late flowering with dahlias, salvias and gingers was still rioting, and there were even snowdrop – a pot of the autumn-flowering Galanthus reginae. But I couldn't help wondering whether in February, when the snowdrops flower en masse, the next owners will appreciate the difference between Lady Fairhaven at £50 a bulb and the charming gracilis – "light and exquisite, like Mozart rather than Beethoven," in Hitch Lyman's words. Or will they see only an impressionistic haze of little white flowers? "That's the painful subject," says Pinckney. "It's not giving up Long Leys, it's what will happen to it."

Showing me around, Collins seems optimistic: "It's good for me to have a change." He has already had one offer of part-time work, and there are bound to be more. Fenton had offered to set him up as a nurseryman, but it feels too precarious in the current climate, so instead he is helping to buy Collins a house with enough land for his treasures. "James has been so generous that I don't have to worry."

Fenton can't see gardening being a part of his own new life. What about getting a place in Connecticut? "You'd have to live there. You'd have to devote yourself." Could he not find an American Mike? No answer; just a scathing look – as scathing as when I suggest he might at least want a bowl of Galanthus gracilis as a reminder of Long Leys. "I won't be fobbed off with something like that. Anyway, it's against the law" [to bring bulbs into America]. Always emotionally impenetrable, Fenton refuses to be drawn about his feelings on losing Long Leys Farm. "You move on," he says definitively. "You do other things."

This is what Pinckney calls "his consolation" – the prospect of renovating a Harlem mansion. Searching for a property "where we can put a library's worth of books", Fenton has become enchanted by ornamental cornices, oak-wainscoting, corinthian columns and mahogany panelling; he has looked at brownstones ranging from a synagogue to a funeral home which still contained coffins and uncollected ashes. It's another massive project, but if friends are concerned, they've learnt to keep quiet. "I shot my bolt over Long Leys," Ian McEwan says. "I've never been more wrong. It turned out to be one of the supreme gardens of England." ■

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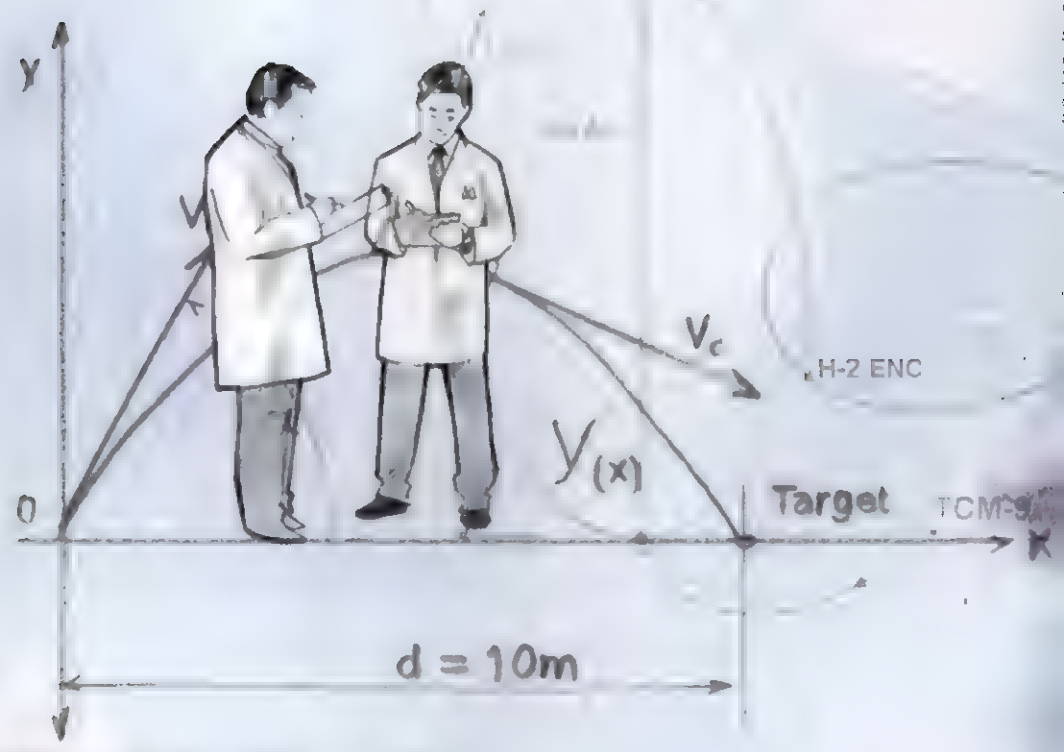

ARE WE TOO PROFESSIONAL?

It's an unstoppable buzzword. But has professionalism gone too far? As a sportsman, ED SMITH saw it backfire at first hand; now he sees this in other fields, from "The Wire" to the banks

A YOUNG NURSE, interviewed by John Humphrys recently on BBC Radio 4's "Today" programme, was asked what she considered the two most important qualities in her job. "Being caring and being compassionate," she replied.

"Not being professional?" Humphrys countered, emphasising that her answer was very unusual.

"No, not being professional," she confirmed.

How did the concept of professionalism become so dominant? And why is it assumed to be innately desirable? Professionalism has certainly travelled a long way in a short time. In the space of a hundred years, the words "professional" and "amateur" have virtually swapped places. At the end of the 19th century, an amateur meant someone who was motivated by the sheer love of doing something; professional was a rare, pejorative term for grubby money-making. Now, amateurism is a byword for sloppiness, disorganisation and ineptitude, while professionalism – as Humphrys suggested – is the default description of excellence. Ours is the age of professionalism; it is a concept in perpetual boom. But all bubbles, as we

ILLUSTRATIONS JAMES CAREY

have painfully learned about finance, must eventually burst. Is it time we let some of the hot air out of professionalism?

In 13 years as a cricketer I watched ultra-professionalism become entrenched as received wisdom. Between 1996 and 2008 I played under 14 different coaches and captains: every one of them began the new season with the stated aim of "making the team more professional". It was a goal that no one challenged and a process that never ended.

Professionalism was continually invoked as the primary means of improvement, whereas amateurishness was mocked as a laughable relic. But it was often unclear to me what the word professionalism meant. "What we really need," people would say, is "a good, solid professional win." How does that differ, I always wanted to ask, from a normal kind of win? In fact, professionalism wasn't so much a real process as a form of self-definition. We had to become ever-more professional, because that was the lens through which we interpreted progress and success.

The question no one ever dared ask was: is professionalism actually helping us to play cricket any better? There >

> were very good reasons for not asking the question. It was too risky – because professionalism supplied not only the dominant ideology, but also the ruling class. In 1996, my cricket team had one coach, working closely with the captain (who has much more power in cricket than in most sports). But by 2008, there were so many coaches, analysts and hangers-on that I couldn't keep up with all their names. Geoff Boycott estimated that the current England team has an auxiliary staff of 13. Even in financially strapped county cricket, the ratio of support staff to players has grown dramatically. Players learn not to ask the question: "What is it that you do, exactly?"

Occasionally, it is true, an ex-pro warned me against over-professionalism. After making a promising start to my first-class career, I was interviewed by the maverick cricketer- turned-journalist Simon Hughes. At the time, I was playing as an amateur for Cambridge University against professional county teams. Hughes suggested that when I made the transition to becoming a full-time pro, I might lose some of the individuality and freshness that had helped me to succeed up to then. I shrugged off his question with a series of professional clichés about "doing whatever it takes to get better".

But Hughes was right. I joined Kent and turned fully professional in 1999. I will never forget my first week as a professional sportsman. Our home ground in Canterbury basked in warm and sunny March weather, but we did not use the perfect practice conditions to hone our batting and bowling skills. Instead, we locked ourselves in a room for three days deciding on the precise wording for a team "Core Covenant".

This was a constitution, intended to revolutionise the team into a slick, professional outfit. We promised to catch 50 extra practice catches every day, no matter how tired we were. We pledged never to say bad luck to each other as luck was just an excuse. Once the covenant's six main articles (all abstract nouns) and dozens of sub-headings were agreed on, we all had to sign a master document. Individual laminated print-offs were distributed for us to pin inside our kit bags, a reminder of the professional code of conduct that we would live by.

We then turned to cricket practice. But the rest of spring was blighted by persistent rain, and we arrived for our first match chronically under-prepared. The whole team seemed confused, but I was particularly at sea. Where older players had learnt to tune out during lengthy theoretical dis-

cussions about how this season would be different, I was young, ambitious and overly determined to do well. I had absorbed too much prescriptive information and lost connection with my intuitive ability. Walking out to bat in that first game, I felt paralysed by a sense of pressure. Instead of allowing myself to enjoy what I loved most – batting – I was trying to live up to a professional ideal. For the first time in my life, I didn't enjoy the game. I feared falling short and worried about the consequences. I made an undignified three. But far worse was the manner of my failure. I felt as if I was in a straitjacket. I had lost my voice. It came back – in time. But I never forgot the experience.

How many others – greater talents but more acquiescent people – feared swimming against the tide and suffered longer in the straitjacket of professionalism? Take Mark Ramprakash, the great "what if" of English cricket. In the early 1990s, Ramprakash was a boy wonder – handsome, precociously gifted and destined for greatness. He was also the closest thing I ever saw to the perfect batsman – balanced, nimble, technically superb, hungry and athletic: a once-in-a-generation player. But his international career was a stop-start affair. He yo-yoed in and out of the England team, expectation morphed into disappointment, and Ramprakash's career became marked by the frustrations of unfulfilled promise.

What happened to the intuitive talent of his early days? "When I was 18 cricket was a game. I used to go and try to hit Malcolm Marshall [perhaps the most feared of all fast bowlers] over the top. Then it became a job. Everyone's so worried about the left elbow – is it in the right place?" The clouds of professionalism descended, and viewing what he did as a job made Ramprakash less good at doing it.

Then came an unexpected invitation to enter the BBC reality show "Strictly Come Dancing", when he was 37. He was a total amateur at dancing, but he discovered a talent for it, and won. "More recently I've been determined to enjoy cricket more," Ramprakash said. "That would be one massive thing I've got from this." The following year, he averaged 100 for the second season running. Only one other batsman since the second world war had averaged over 100 in two separate seasons – and no one had ever done it in consecutive years. This year, as his 40th birthday loomed, Ramprakash was the leading county batsman again with an average of 90.

Luiz Felipe Scolari, the football coach who led Brazil to the 2002 World Cup, summed up what we might call the Ramprakash paradox. "My priority is to ensure that players feel more amateur than professional," Scolari explained. "Thirty to forty years ago, the effort was the other way. Now there is so much professionalism, we have to revert to urging players to like the game, love it, do it with joy."

When I was made captain of Middlesex in 2007, the administrators asked me to provide a favourite sporting quote for the team handbook. I chose those words by Scolari. The next season they were cut – not debated, just silently excised.

I never doubted that professionalism had brought some benefits, especially in fitness and fielding. But I questioned the idea that more and more professionalism was the only solution when elite sport had already become so formulaic. It is a question of balance. If, as was often the case 50 years ago, opposing teams were unfit and under-prepared, then the professional mantra of extra planning and more training yielded a competitive advantage. But what if all the teams are training phenomenally hard and planning every minute of every game? In that context, surely the way to get ahead is to make better >

> My priority is to ensure that players feel more amateur than professional
> ~ LUIZ FELIPE SCOLARI

> judgments about people and how to get the best out of them – or, more accurately, how not to mess them up.

OVER-PROFESSIONALISM IS everywhere. Teachers in England are trained to plan lessons in segments of three minutes, a theory which leaves little room for spontaneity in the classroom. They are also often exhausted before term even starts because of the endemic pressure to plan every lesson weeks in advance. It is all too tempting for teachers to sacrifice freshness – which is impossible to measure or record on paper – in favour of form-filling. But can education ever be mapped out in such prescriptive terms? Anthony Seldon, Master of Wellington College, thinks not: "The erosion of trust in education is sucking the life out of classrooms, teachers and students. You can tick all the boxes under the sun and still be a lousy teacher. You cannot encapsulate the human experience of learning in some mechanistic pedantry."

> You cannot encapsulate the human experience of learning in some mechanistic pedantry

In "Stepping Stones", a series of interviews with Dennis O'Driscoll, the poet Seamus Heaney explores similar territory: "Even in my 50s, in Harvard, if I had a lecture I'd be up early to try to get it squared out in my head – not that I could ever quite manage to do so. Lecturing week after week, as part of the pedagogic routine, is more of a test than people realise. In the end, the most important thing is to be in good physical and mental shape. You can prepare as much as you like and amass material galore, but unless you come in fresh, like an athlete onto the track, you aren't going to do the job required."

Nor is over-professionalism confined to the public sector. Journalists at several British national newspapers are encouraged to submit weekly work-plans, even though the stories haven't yet happened. We can all congratulate ourselves on how hard we are working, but does it make for better articles?

Measurement is another fetish of professionalism, as if something that cannot be measured isn't quite real. This was a central criticism by Sir Ivor Roberts, who wrote a stinging valedictory telegram when he retired as the British ambassador in Rome in 2006: "Well-conducted diplomacy cannot properly be measured. We manage or contain disputes; very rarely do we deliver a quantifiable solution. Indeed, we should be sceptical of 'permanent' solutions or models."

Roberts also quoted a remark by Chris Patten, the former Hong Kong governor and European commissioner. It was sad, Patten had said, "to see experienced diplomats trained to draft brief and lucid telegrams...terrorised into filling questionnaires by management consultants by the yard."

"The Wire", HBO's cult television drama series, is based on saturation-level journalistic research about the Baltimore police department. It has captured the imagination of middle England and been hailed the greatest ever TV drama. Why? "The Wire" describes universal problems that we all face in the workplace. When the brilliant but roguish cop Jimmy McNulty tries to bring down the gangs that run Baltimore's criminal underworld, he is thwarted more by the police department's chain of command than the criminals. For McNulty's superiors, the "war on drugs" is not about cleaning up Baltimore's streets but about procuring the right crime statistics to win promotion. So it's expedient to solve the easy crimes and ignore the hard ones.

The series presents a bleak story: you are far more likely to be promoted in "The Wire" for toeing the line than for being good at your job. In fact, the two best policemen are eventually forced out of the police department – they were too much of a threat to the established order. When an ex-cop takes up teaching, he despairs at the parallels in education. He's told to ignore real education that can't easily be measured and "teach for the test" to boost the school's exam stats. "The Wire" may be stylised and fictional, but it contains kernels of truth about the frustrations of battling professional orthodoxy.

IN 1923, THE German thinker Eugen Herrigel, hoping to master Zen philosophy, visited Japan and immersed himself in archery. He wrote in his classic study "Zen in the Art of Archery": "Archery is not practised solely for hitting the target; the swordsman does not wield the sword just for the sake of outdoing his opponent; the dancer does not dance just to perform certain rhythmical movements of the body." The target may be hit, the opponent outdone, the dance technically perfect – but those outcomes will be merely the happy by-products of a deeper absorption with the activity itself. And that is best achieved, according to Herrigel, by avoiding prescriptive goals and techniques.

That is the theme of John Kay's forthcoming book "Obliquity", to be published by the Erasmus Press in January. Kay is an Oxford academic, *Financial Times* columnist and, as the former director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, a leading economist. I visited him at his house in Marylebone, London, the day before he flew off to George Soros's New York summit on global finance.

It was no surprise to find a donnish, quietly spoken and intensely considered grey-haired man sitting opposite a portrait of Adam Smith. More surprising was Kay's readiness to make connections between playing Su Doku and >

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> the collapse of Lehman Brothers, and between Boeing and David Beckham.

Kay's argument is that many goals are best pursued obliquely. Happiness, he argues, is more easily experienced as a by-product of something else rather than as an ambition in itself: "Anyone who has changed a nappy, or failed to quieten a childish tantrum, will recognise that looking after children is an oblique route to happiness. Yet many people say that bringing up their children was the best experience of their life." More controversially, Kay also believes that profit is best sought obliquely rather than as the primary goal of business. He emphasises the collapse of Lehman Brothers and Bear Stearns: "If you emphasise profit-orientation, what you are really doing is giving a local licence to individual greed. The history of the first decade of the 21st century is the history of the self-destruction of America's most aggressively profit-oriented financial institutions."

Kay also queries the literal-mindedness and prescribed goals of mission statements – business versions of the Core Covenant. He tells the story of ICI, Britain's largest and most successful manufacturing company for most of the 20th century. In 1991 the predatory takeover specialist Hanson bought a modest stake in ICI, and although the threat to the company's independence did not last long, ICI declared a new mission statement: "ICI's vision is to be the leader in creating value for customers and shareholders through market leadership, technological edge and a world competitive cost base." The outcome was not successful in any terms, including profit or shareholder value. After peaking in 1997, the share price declined relentlessly. By 2007, ICI ceased to exist as an independent company.

> The pursuit of a mistaken kind of rationality has in practice produced wide irrationality ~ JOHN KAY

So does having a clearly defined goal and a prescriptive method make it more likely that we will misunderstand the real goal and adopt the wrong method? "There's a joke about economics," Kay answers, lightly amused at his own profession. "It's the only would-be science in which if the world isn't like the model, then it's the world's problem. The odd thing is I am criticising not so much the world as the way people describe the world – and then make the world worse by trying to bash the world into their model."

Kay turns to the financial crisis, which was at least partly caused by excessive faith in the professional expertise of the banks' quantitative analysts: "Banks persuaded themselves that risk management could be treated as a problem that was closed, determinate and tractable. We, and they, learnt that they were wrong. We opened the door to much unscientific nonsense. The pursuit of a mistaken kind of rationality has in practice produced wide irrationality. It's a question of having the judgment to say 'This feels unstable.' The bogus professionalism proved deceptive."

It is a counter-intuitive point, given that many people believe a major factor in the financial crisis was that the banks' top brass didn't know enough about complex financial engineering to understand what was happening in their own companies. In that context, it sounds almost heretical: is Kay really suggesting that the gentlemen bankers of the old City of London, who had to rely on judgments rather than precise mathematical modelling, might have done better at averting crisis than today's whiz kids?

"Very clearly," Kay answers slightly reluctantly. And though he is quick not to canonise the old-style City gent – "Some old City types thought they knew a lot more than they did" – the underlying point stands. Whatever our sphere of work, we have to distinguish between what is analytically soluble and what is essentially mysterious. And often the most successful methods fall into the latter category. The legendary investor George Soros, for example, says he had learnt to interpret backache as a signal that something is wrong with his fund: "It used to occur before I knew what was wrong, often even before the fund began to decline in value."

"The nature of many kinds of skill cannot be defined," Kay adds. "If we could define or completely explain them in terms of a set of rules then anyone could do it."

Kay also questions the professional mantra that we should slavishly copy winners: "It is a delusion to think that there is an underlying desirable process which you can extract from the performance of the skilful and then transmit to everybody else. And yet there are clearly bits of knowledge of that kind which a good coach or boss can see and use – either a generic problem that he's observed in many other situations, or else a problem specific to you that can still be fixed. So we need not go to the other extreme of saying, 'Well, some people are just naturally good performers and some aren't.' "

It's a succinct description of what I call the Tiger Woods fallacy – the idea, all too common among professionals, that we must copy the freaks of relentless mono-focus because it works for them. Listening to an economist make an argument so relevant to professional sport, I couldn't resist suggesting to Kay that if he tired of the professorial life he might consider coaching a cricket team. We'd start him with the reserves, of course, so he could receive a full professional training before exposing him to the top players. "I'm a bit too ambitious for that!" Kay said with a laugh. Maybe so, but he had already demonstrated a perfect – and deeply unprofessional – example of obliquity at work. ■

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The newspaper room
Ann Wroe catches up with the news from 1800. The Wordsworths would read the papers, then use them as insulation

PHOTOGRAPHS ABBIE TRAYLER-SMITH

AUTHORS ON MUSEUMS

A continuous force

William Wordsworth didn't just live in the Lake District – he helped define it. For the sixth in our series of favourite museums, ANN WROE celebrates Dove Cottage, once Wordsworth's home, now his memorial

"PLEASE DON'T MENTION the rain," pleads the man in the Dove Cottage shop. It's hard not to; water is running down his anorak and dripping on the floor. Harsh drops beat against the windows, which show a misty procession of visitors shrouded in capes and hoods. "The Cumbrian Tourist Board will be very upset with me." In the porch of Dove Cottage, across the road, a basket which might have held broad beans or apples is now crammed with flimsy collapsible umbrellas in bright pink, blue and green.

It rains a lot in the Lake District, even in August, but tourists soon learn not to care. Water is intrinsic and essential to this place. I walked to Dove Cottage the hard way, through soaking bracken up to Alcock Tarn and down the other side. For the first half-mile I followed Greenhead Gill in spate, surging through high dark rocks hung with rain-dripping brambles, sycamore and ash. That furious brown water, swirling, foaming, leaping and thundering, represented for Romantics the continuous force of thought: William Wordsworth's thought, as he walked here two centuries ago, humming and hawing along the roads as his neighbours observed him, making poems. That quiet pool, out of the flow, surrounded by mossy stones and where only one ripple enters, would have marked for him a point of equipoise and calm, in which words could be captured; that lace of foam, full of sparkling and bursting bubbles like a nebula of stars, suggested the transitoriness of human effort and human affairs. Wordsworth looked on these things, and mused as he looked. His presence has moulded the landscape as surely as streams and rain, so that the whole area round Grasmere, not just Dove Cottage, is a monument and museum to him.

Dove Cottage was the home to which, from 1799 to 1808, he returned from his walks, the nurturing cell in which many of his best poems were grown. His poetical career was long, lasting until 1850, and the muse gleamed only fitfully in the last decades. He had become a national poet, like Tennyson; the productiv-

> ity was there, but not the light. By contrast, in Dove Cottage he wrote this:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!

And these lines, almost too well-known, on his sighting of wild daffodils in Ullswater:

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay;
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

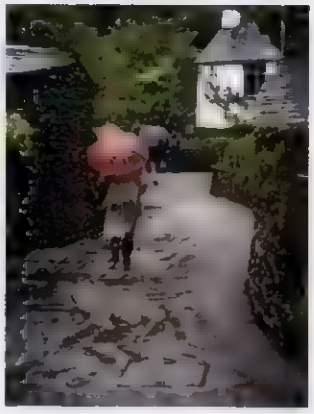
And these, perhaps his greatest, from the "Immortality" ode:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar;
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
From God, who is our home.

The blaze of inspiration in these poems – the sense of each object "apparell'd in celestial light" – is all the more striking because Dove Cottage is a dark, poky place. The steep slopes of Rydal Fell and Nab Scar crowd in this tiny, limewashed house to north, south and east; only to the south-west does the view open up to Grasmere Lake and the facing mountains, chased by shifting colours and shadows of the clouds, as Dorothy, Wordsworth's sister, often described them.

THE COTTAGE WAS once a pub, the Dove and Olive Bough, on the road to Rydal; the word "snug" might have been coined for it. As Wordsworth entered, shrugging off his wet coat in the vestibule, he would have found a welcoming fire in a small, low room wainscotted in dark oak from floor to ceiling. The panelling hid walls deep-stained with drinkers' tobacco smoke. The latticed window, one-third larger now than it was then, would have looked out mostly on the glistening slabs of slate used (illegally) by William and Dorothy to enclose a patch of garden in front of the house. A dry stone wall has long replaced them, now overgrown with ivy, herb robert and wild strawberries. It may not be authentic, but it seems right. In the rain, each thin stalk and green leaf is diamonded with drops.

To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.



The definitive snug
MAIN PICTURE Don't try this at his home Ann Wroe tries the chaise longue under Wordsworth's watchful eye
ABOVE "Water is intrinsic to this place"
TOP RIGHT William's tiny suitcase

The entrance room, called the "Houseplace", contains a primitive painting of a mournful, cross-eyed dog. This is Pepper, a gift to the Wordsworths from Sir Walter Scott, and a reminder that there were children here, at least for a few years. In 1802 William married Mary Hutchinson; by the time they moved out there were three toddlers, who sometimes slept in a recess under the kitchen table, tucked in baskets, and sometimes in a minuscule unheated room upstairs, insulated by Dorothy with pages from the *Times*. (The pages have had to be replaced, which the Wordsworth Trust has done with great care and ingenuity, finding pages of just the right date, including one from 1800 with an advertisement for the second edition of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's revolutionary democratisation of poetry, the "Lyrical Ballads".) The newspaper room, as it is called, sums up much of the character of this place. From remote Grasmere the Wordsworths kept up keenly with the news of the day, both through papers and a stream of visitors, but the real use of good rag newspaper was to keep infants

warm. This was a house where nothing was wasted: where dogwood twigs from the garden, stripped and frayed, made toothbrushes, and where used tea-leaves were dried and sent to friends.

The kitchen tells the same tale. Two objects, on the mantlepiece over the (later) range, evoke the importance of frugality—and of light. One is a candle-mould, into which melted mutton fat and beeswax were poured and cooled. The other is a rush-light holder, in which the rush may be adjusted diagonally for one person reading or writing, or horizontally, burning at both ends, for two. There were usually two people working here in the evenings: William dictating, from his favourite "cutlass" chair or cane-seated couch (both still here), and Dorothy or Mary inscribing. The mere light of rush or candle did not go very far; it illuminated, perhaps, the table top. When several were reading and sewing, their heads were bent companionably together. From out on the benighted fells, the window would have shone like a star.

The Wordsworth household at Grasmere was a

triangle of poet, sister and wife. Both women waited on the great man, cooking his mutton chops and mending his thick grey socks, watching anxiously how he ate and how he slept, for poetry-making wore out his nerves. Both loved him, and he loved them. His relationship with Dorothy and hers with him seem to have been perfectly correct, sealed by brotherly-sisterly tenderness and mutual inspiration. Nonetheless there is often a frisson in this house, of feelings suppressed. It touches you especially in William's bedroom, which became Dorothy's in 1802, and from which she watched swallows building and rebuilding in the eaves over the window. It now contains William's and Mary's nuptial bed, very small and cosy under a patterned quilt; Dorothy nailed up the valances and hessian hangings on this bed to make it even cosier, a love nest. The mirror on the washstand, which was Dorothy's, now reflects the bed in its dim, spotted glass. On it lies William's tiny suitcase, which she probably packed for him: for four weeks in France in 1802, when he was revisiting his first French lover, one day-shirt, one night-shirt, a notebook and a pen.

Not many objects are kept in the cottage now. They have gone to the Wordsworth Museum up the road, or to the splendid modern library and archive at the Jerwood Centre next door to it. But in glass-fronted cupboards upstairs lie Wordsworth's wooden skates, which he nailed onto his shoes ("All shod with steel/We hissed along the polished ice in games/... and every icy crag/Tinkled like iron"). There are delicate teacups, whose worn rims still seem to hold the murmur of conversation, and lurking nearby a small, dark phial of Kendal Black Drop laudanum, the cure for most aches and pains in this house. But perhaps most moving is a small piece of bright blue stone that was found, after his death, in Wordsworth's dressing-case. "Mr W's eyes have been cured by one of our visitors, Mr Reynolds, who prescribed touching them >

TIPS FOR YOUR VISIT

When to go A freezing, clear winter's day, with open fires – and fewer tourists. Failing that, in spring with the lambs and daffodils, or autumn, for the colours and (relative) dryness. Dove Cottage is open daily except Christmas and January 4th-29th; 9.30am-5.30pm, last entry 5pm (in winter: closing 4.30pm, last entry 4pm); £7.50 adults, £4.50 children.

How to get there Grasmere sits on the A591, one of England's most scenic routes. From the north you scale the Dunmail Raise, from the south you skirt the shores of Lake Windermere and Rydal Water. Windermere station is 20 minutes away; trains from London take three and a half hours, while the drive is about five hours. The postcode is LA22 9SH.

Where to stay The Holbeck Ghyll in Windermere and Sharrow Bay in Ullswater both have Michelin stars: £125 and £175 pppn respectively, including dinner. The Drunken Duck has many advocates, not least for its view, doubles from £95 a night. Or try comfy camping in a yurt at Rydal Hall, from £265 a week. Go native at Black Sail hut, from £13.95 a night, accessible by foot only; or the National Trust's bothy in Loweswater, from £40 per night, boating rights included.

What to read Wainwright's hand-drawn books: "the best guide to fell-walking," says Ann Wroe, "and beautiful things in themselves."

What else to see Complete the Wordsworth experience with a trip to his childhood home (www.wordsworthhouse.org.uk), his house at Rydal Mount (www.rydalmount.co.uk), and his grave in Grasmere – although in local eyes, the life was sapped from the town by the first coachload of tourists. For a jaunt, head round Grasmere lake, munching gingerbread as you >

Nothing lonely about these clouds
LEFT Dove Cottage with the rain pressing in
BELOW LEFT Echinops (globe thistle) points the way
BOTTOM Pepper the dog, a gift from Walter Scott

> go (www.grasmeregingerbread.co.uk), or take up the more serious challenge of Helvellyn, the third-highest peak in England. And set some time aside for the views. Be inspired by the craggy Langdales, or head over the passes to the dramatic screes of Wast Water and fells of Scafell. The Buttermere and Honister circuit is an equally stunning drive, or ditch the car and cycle the trails round Whinlatter and Grizedale forests. If it's wet, chat with the locals over a pint at the Golden Rule in Ambleside, or take tea at John Ruskin's house overlooking Coniston (www.brantwood.org.uk). And if you overdo it, there's always the new spa at Armathwaite Hall, where Gordon Brown stayed last summer. - ANDREW GILBERT

> with the Blue Stone which acted like magic on them," wrote Sara Hutchinson, Mary's sister, in 1826. A pair of spectacles on the same shelf, with small dark lenses, confirm that those eyes, which saw "into the life of things", were physically weak, and often hurt him.

ON ALL THE back windows of the cottage the garden presses in, lushly green and shining with rain. Roses, heavy with their soaking, lean against the glass, and sprays of fern fall down like water. The lawn is slippery and steep, rising to the woods and the fell. William and Dorothy laboured on this "little Nook of mountain ground", and Dorothy recorded it all in her journal: stringing up the scarlet beans, cutting the pea sticks, transplanting "raddishes", and William's digging of the shallow, muddy well. They grew most of the vegetables they ate with their almost sempiternal porridge. But this was also a place where Nature and her moving, affecting power might be brought in from outside, corralled with the ferns and columbines and marsh-marigolds which the Wordsworths had purloined from the lakeside. In this "Dear Spot" William built a terrace, where he could pace back and forth as he did along the roads, gazing over the lake and the favourite mountains, Helm Crag and Silver How, to find inspiration. "We walked backwards & forwards", wrote Dorothy on March 17th 1802, until "William kindled, and began to write the poem." Another time, at the end of April, "Walked backwards & forwards with William – he repeated his poem to me – then he got to work again & would not give over" [a lovely northern note] "– he had not finished his dinner till 5 o clock." Thanks to Dorothy, we know he was writing his lines "To the Small Celandine".

Ere a leaf is on a bush,
In the time before the thrush
Has a thought about her nest,
Thou wilt come with half a call,
Spreading out thy glossy breast
Like a careless Prodigal;
Telling tales about the sun
When we've little warmth, or none.

An "Indian shed", now speculatively reconstructed, was built at the top of the garden, and beneath it a "sodded wall" from which they watched tourists in landaus going past. One wonders what the tourists made of them: the lanky, aquiline poet and the thin, dreamy women, their hands still red from chores, lying on their cloaks on the orchard grass to look at blossom falling and listen to the birds.

IN MID-AFTERNOON sunlight falls on Dove Cottage, unexpectedly, like a grace. The Japanese tourists are astonished. They come out of the back door blinking, lowering their umbrellas. As Wordsworth did, they watch "the dancing of shadows amid a press of sunshine", washed by the last gleams of the rain. It is easy to lose confidence in Lake District weather. But in the end – as in the dingiest corners of this unassuming house – the light that he evoked with such power is always palpably there.

The stars pre-eminent in magnitude,
And they that from the zenith dart their beams
(Visible though they be to half the earth,
Though half a sphere be conscious of their brightness)
Are yet of no diviner origin,
No purer essence, than the one that burns,
Like an untended watch-fire, on the ridge
Of some dark mountain; or than those which seem
Humbly to hang, like twinkling winter lamps,
Among the branches of the leafless trees;
All are the undying offspring of one Sire:
Then, to the measure of the light vouchsafed,
Shine, Poet! in thy place, and be content. ■

This December, the world's governments will gather in Copenhagen to usher in the New Clean Economy. Climate Savers will be there. These companies are shaping the new reality by combining CO_2 reductions and business growth. By 2010 they will have collectively decreased their CO_2 emissions by 50 million tons while creating competitive advantage and increasing shareholder value. They're proving that climate leadership makes sense – for business and for the planet. Now is the time for the world's governments to lead us further along this path, into a new era. The future is calling, and the world is waiting. Follow the leaders at: **panda.org/cleaneconomy**

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ANIMATION

Homer v Mickey

After 20 years "The Simpsons" is almost as established as Disney. BEE WILSON compares and contrasts two giants of pop culture

HOMER SIMPSON, THAT lovable yellow lunkhead, is probably the best-known idiot on the planet. His catchphrase – D'oh! – is the expression of a deeply limited brain constantly surprised by its own folly. In episode 257 of "The Simpsons", "HOMR", we learn that he wasn't born like that: he has actually had a crayon lodged in his brain since the age of six. Following an operation to remove the crayon, Homer finally becomes smart. "I was working on a flat-tax proposal", he remarks, "and I accidentally proved there's no God." But intelligence has its downside. For the first time, Homer feels alienated by the stupidity of mainstream culture. He drifts past a Disney store, and he is filled with unbearable sadness, no longer able to relate to the homogenised rubbish on sale. In the end, he can take it no more, and pays Moe the bartender to shove another crayon in his brain, so he can rejoin the Disney-watching, donut-munching masses.

It's a typical gag from a show that has always been a kind of anti-Disney. John Ortved, author of "Simpsons Confidential" (Ebury Press), a superb new oral history, tells me that from the start "The Simpsons" was a conscious "departure from Disney" and the "commodified culture" it represents. Matt Groening, who first thought up "The Simpsons" as a segment on "The Tracey Ullman Show", is a 1960s liberal with a deep distrust of the established order. In the late 1980s there was no more established cultural institution than Disney, with its cute, cuddly, woodland creatures, big-jawed heroes, and princesses who are beautiful, good and (ultimately) happy. As Ortved says, "Disney ruled the world from 'Snow White' to 'The Lion King' – that's a 60-year time-span." The first full "Simpsons" episode aired in 1989, the year of "The Little Mermaid", in which yet another saucer-eyed beauty finds true love with yet another bland prince. "The Simpsons", like its own town bully Nelson Muntz, came along and said "Ha-ha!" to all of that.

From the first anarchic bars of Danny Elfman's theme tune, "The Simpsons" satirises Disney's bland small-town values. Our hero works at a nuclear-power plant. His ten-year-old son has to write on a board: "I will not burp in class", "I will not Xerox my butt", "I will not barf unless I'm sick", and, best of all, "I will not get very far with this attitude". This is a world in which none of the Disney pieties are true. If they were, then Ned Flanders, the Simpsons' annoyingly perfect next-door neighbour ("I've done everything the Bible says: even the stuff that contradicts the other stuff!"), wouldn't be a figure of fun. When you wish upon a star in "The Simpsons", your dreams don't come true – you end up a loser like Ralph Wiggum, the police chief's son, who eats glue and talks to leprechauns. Good does not triumph over evil, and being true to yourself often leads to terrible consequences. "Just look into your heart and you will find the answer," says the store owner Apu to evil Mr Burns in "The Simpsons Movie", pleading with him to help the townspeople of Springfield out of a dire emergency. Burns looks into his heart and unleashes his hounds, who chase Apu from the premises.

"The Simpsons" is sprinkled with Disney references (episodes include "When You Dish Upon a Star") and loves to mock Disney's pretensions to world dominance. Its "krazy" versions of Disneyland range from Itchy and Scratchyland to the beer-themed Duff Gardens, where Bart is taken for a treat by his gravel-voiced aunt Selma. "I want to get off!" says Bart.

"You can't get off!" Selma replies. "We still have five continents to visit!"

EVEN WHEN NOT taunting Disney "The Simpsons" conjures up an alternative universe. The most obvious difference is the crudeness of the animation. Whatever you think of the Disney aesthetic, there's no denying the artistry of the drawing. There is an undiminished thrill in seeing lots of fluid lines all moving simultaneously: Snow White and assorted animals cleaning the dwarfs' house, Bambi falling on ice, Dumbo dreaming of elephants on parade. Disney's draughtsmanship has seeped into our collective dreams.

By contrast, "The Simpsons" has a crude look, all bright colours and simple lines, so it's easy to assume that these funny-looking yellow people are meant to be childish. The comedian Ricky Gervais has talked about how he found "The Simpsons" off-putting at first. "I think I saw that video 'Do the Bartman' and I thought it was an awful, brattish American thing for whiny kids. Then when I saw [an episode], I thought, Well, how is this a kids' show? It's one of the most intelligent things on television. It's fantastic. It's a beautiful set-up, the characterisation's amazing, it takes

PHOTOGRAPHS COLIN CRISFORD

that dysfunctional family and looks at every single aspect of life. It's wickedly satirical. It's audacious."

"The Simpsons" subverted everything we expected of cartoons. It took the anarchy of Hanna-Barbera and the comic violence of Looney Tunes and gave them a degree. That first season dug out old Flintstones chestnuts like trying to impress the boss or keeping up with the neighbours and added alcoholism, electric-shock therapy and vandalism. It proved you didn't have to be as soppy as Disney to make animation that the whole family could enjoy.

"The Simpsons" was, as Ortved says, "rebellious, ironic, highbrow, silly, crude, intertextually hyperactive, iconoclastic, sly, witty and retarded". Seth Macfarlane, inventor of "Family Guy" (the animated sitcom which now out-satirises "The Simpsons"), remembers being at college and wanting to work for Disney. "They were the biggest thing happening in animation at the time, because of their resurgence. Then 'The Simpsons' came on the scene and completely eclipsed Disney in sophistication."

In contrast to Disney, with its lush visuals and stark storylines, the sophistication of "The Simpsons" was all in the scripts, which are highly literate, gaily referring to everything from Susan Sontag to "Citizen Kane". Children who have been brought up on the show often have a weird general knowledge. When Al Gore was vice-president, only 63% of American kids surveyed could identify him, whereas 93% could identify the cast of "The Simpsons". Children may know the yellow versions of Richard Nixon or the Beatles long before they encounter the real thing. My ten-year-old son recently read "Lord of the Flies". He didn't find it that upsetting: he already knew most of the plot from "Das Bus", "Simpsons" episode 192.

The key here was the producer James L. Brooks, who had written the films "Broadcast News" and "Terms of Endear ment" and brought the belief that the writing mattered above all else. The animation – now largely outsourced to Korea – does the job adequately, with its madcap yellow energy and neat sight gags. But the genius of "The Simpsons" is in the words – sparkling scripts, delivered by the effervescent voices of Dan Castellenata (Homer and Krusty), Julie Kavner (Marge), Yeardley Smith (Lisa), Nancy Cartwright (Bart and a troupe of small boys), Hank Azaria (Moe, Chief Wiggum, Apu et al) and perhaps the greatest of them all, Harry Shearer, who voices Burns, Smithers, Flanders, Principal Skinner, Dr Hibbert, Grampa's decrepit friend Jasper Beardly et al. This is animation in the other sense: bringing two-dimensional characters to life.

"The Simpsons" works almost as well blind, as I know from long car journeys when the kids have a DVD player in the back seat and I listen to it with my husband from the front, like radio. It's no coincidence that Harry Shearer presents a much-loved American radio programme, the subversive "Le Show". Disney without the images – with the exception of "The Jungle Book", still the king of the soundtracks – would be largely pointless: all saccharine voices and no thrill.

THIS DIFFERENCE BETWEEN the status of words and images is the tip of a deeper chasm. In Walt Disney's original studios, the focus was on the painstaking work of animation, often undertaken by large teams of MittelEuropean immigrants. Under the tyrannical rule of Disney himself, these were craftsmen, and some of their best work celebrated the craft ideal – >

As Marge told Barbara Bush: "Each of us is here to serve an exceptional man"

> such as Gepetto's wondrous studio in "Pinocchio", in which myriad clockwork devices spring and whirr.

On "The Simpsons" the power lies in the legendary writers' room. In the early days, the animators were young students from Caltech, a small science college in Pasadena, and they played second fiddle to the writers (mostly men, all white). At the show's height, from seasons three to ten (1991-99), these were some of the smartest guys in showbusiness. In addition to Matt Groening, there was Sam Simon (a writer on "Cheers" and "Taxi"), George Meyer (a *New Yorker* writer and humorist), and Conan O'Brien (who has now replaced Jay Leno as the host of "The Tonight Show"), plus other assorted Ivy Leaguers. Thanks to the clout of James L. Brooks, they never had to take notes from the studio execs at Fox. They were free to throw "lightning fastballs" at each other. In its testosterone competitiveness, and obsession with its own internal pecking-order, it sounds more like an investment bank. Brent Forrester, a writer-producer from 1993 to 1997, remembers "somebody pitching a joke that I just didn't get. You know, I only went to Columbia University, not Harvard."

This atmosphere threw up a totally different view of life from Disney's. In Walt's world, the nuclear family is the end-point towards which all the narrative is moving. No matter what disparate creatures we start off with – dogs, cats, dwarfs – they are almost always fitted into a simple arc ending in marriage. In "The Simpsons", the nuclear family of Homer and Marge plus Bart, Lisa and the speechless baby Maggie, is the starting-point, around which swirls an ever crazier assemblage of minor characters and screwball plots. Next to this richness, the Disney universe can seem thin: just heroes and villains. It has no room for a freak like Comic Book Guy, a pretentious überdork who is neither goodie nor baddie, just very, very strange.

Because it is so satirical, it's easy to assume that "The Simpsons" is darker than Disney. But in many ways, the opposite is true. Disney films are full of death, tragedy and cruel parenting – think of all the evil stepmothers and witches, as well as the killing of Bambi's mother and the absence of Dumbo's, both of which are enough to break anyone's heart. Then there's that resurrection thing they keep doing at the end of films where the main character seems to die, only to miraculously revive (Baloo in "The Jungle Book", Beast in "Beauty and the Beast"). It's easy to mock this playing on our heartstrings, but the people at Disney know that we have to be properly scared before we can be properly moved. Seeing Pinocchio inside the whale searching for his father stirs you in a way Matt Groening's ironists would never attempt.

"The Simpsons" is lighter. Unlike much of the animation that has come in its wake – the gross-out humour of "South Park" and "Family Guy" – it is always anchored in the solace of family. Nothing too bad can happen in a household that has Marge Simpson at its head, with her magnificent blue beehive, infinite tolerance and deep "grrrrrr". Ortved reveals that the writers tend to grumble about writing Marge storylines ("because we were a bunch of boys, really," says one), preferring the easy gags of Homer. But the humour needs the solid values of Marge (and Lisa, her remarkable, diligent, tree-hugging, vegetarian, saxophonist daughter) to anchor it. Without Marge's misplaced belief in him, Homer's idiocy could be distressing. As Marge once wrote to Barbara Bush (who in 1990, as first lady, had dismissed the show as dumb): "Each of us is living our lives to serve an exceptional man."

There's something comforting about the way no one in Springfield ever changes or ages. Disney loves to tangle with the travails of growing up: Mowgli, Hercules and Tarzan are all like the heroes of earnest bildungsromans, forging the difficult path to manhood. The Simpsons have no such struggles. No matter how many dramas happen to them – kidnap, imprisonment, nuclear meltdown – Bart is always ten, Lisa eight and Maggie a baby. As Ortved writes: "A pubescent Bart is scary, a teenage Bart is depressing, and anything past that is too terrible to contemplate."

Twenty years on, some wonder just how much longer Springfield can stay in its state of arrested development. There was a serious dip in quality from around series 13 onwards. "Simpsons" purists believe the rot set in as early as season nine, when Mike Scully took over as showrunner and the plotlines became a lot wackier. This is too harsh: season nine began with an all-time great episode ("The city of New York vs Homer Simpson") and there have been gems even in the latest series. But it's true that the characters have become caricatures of their former selves. Lisa is now unbearably right-on and Homer has lost much of his sweet doltishness (though I'd still rather listen to Dan Castellenata's voice for 20 minutes than catch a single glimpse of Hannah Montana on the Disney Channel). Marge's appearance in *Playboy* was worse than a caricature – it was a travesty. It might be no bad thing if the plug is pulled after episode 500, as has long been rumoured, which would take the show up to 2012.

After two decades of dominance, it's now much harder for "The Simpsons" to act as Disney's rebellious younger brother. The show uses Krusty the Klown to mock merchandising – Krustyburger Laffy

Meals, Krusty-Os cereal, Krusty-Brand Imitation Gruel ("nine out of ten orphans can't tell the difference"). Yet it has become almost as rapacious as Disney in its merchandising. Groening has approved everything from Bart snowboots to smell-o-rific air freshener. My own household has accumulated one talking Homer pizza cutter, one giant inflatable Bart who sometimes joins us on the sofa to watch the show, one "Simpsons" board game, a Bart pencil case, a whole shelf of comics and books, and a pile of action figures too numerous to mention, including a plastic Marge carrying a vast stack of pancakes and syrup. If this is the counter-culture, then what is the culture?

Tim Long, a writer-producer for "The Simpsons" since 1999, has said that Groening has become "kind of the Walt Disney of our time". Judging from the way the show has fixed itself in popular culture, that is probably true. "The Simpsons" is now broadcast in over 90 countries and has netted around $3 billion, much more if you include merchandising (in 2004 alone, more than $1.65 billion of Simpsons merchandise was sold, while Disney's net income was $4.48 billion). But it's also a problem. "Bart's Inner Child" is an episode (no 88) from the good old days of season five, when a self-help guru encourages everyone in Springfield to act like Bart, spitting and swearing and generally cutting loose. Bart hates it: "Everyone in town is acting like me. So why does it suck?"

"It's simple," says Lisa. "You've defined yourself as a rebel and in the absence of a repressive milieu your societal niche has been co-opted...You've lost your identity." She's right, as usual: Bart's entire personality was based on rebelling. With nothing to rebel against, he is a lost soul. The question is, has the same thing happened to "The Simpsons"?

Disney has learned how to play the Bart role, which reduces the need for Bart to be himself. Brad Bird, an executive consultant on "The Simpsons" from 1989 to 1992, brought Simpsons-esque characterisation to Pixar, owned by Disney, in "The Incredibles" (2004) and "Ratatouille" (2007). The Incredible family of superheroes include a portly dad having a midlife crisis, a goth-emo teenager who can make herself disappear and a gurgling baby who, like Maggie Simpson, looks cute but turns out to be a kind of evil genius. Pixar, though owned by Disney since 2006, is still creatively separate. Yet even the main Disney Studio proper has learned to mock itself – when it isn't making dross like "High School Musical 3". In 2007 Disney made fun of its own saccharine tradition of animated princesses with the brilliant "Enchanted", whose heroine enlists the help of a swarm of cockroaches, rats and pigeons to clean a New York apartment. This was a much funnier take on Disney woodland animals than the sequence in "The Simpsons Movie" where Disney-ish animals watch, appalled, as Marge and Homer have sex. Meanwhile, "The Simpsons" edges towards the corporate horror of Disneyland. "In 2008", Ortved notes, "the 'Simpsons' ride opened at Universal Studios – one step closer."

The bigger and more Disney-like "The Simpsons" has become, the more its writers feel the need to turn their pens in on themselves. Lately "The Simpsons" itself has seemed to be the main object of their satire. We've had gags about clip shows, sneaky references to not winning Emmys and even a parody of the "Simpsons" writers' room (in "The Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie Show"). In one 2002 episode Bart's chalkboard vow was "I will never lie about being cancelled again", a reference to rumours that the show was going to be axed. "The Simpsons Movie" seemed a shot at achieving a Disney-like immortality. But despite some inspired one-liners – and the genius of Spider-Pig, Homer's pet pig which he plays with like a Spiderman doll – the movie lacked the density of the best short episodes. And it ended with another self-referential gag, Maggie uttering the single word "Sequel?" It confirmed that though "The Simpsons" may win best animated television show hands-down – Disney's made-for-TV efforts are mediocre – it still cannot beat Disney at the movies. I suspect Matt Groening knows this. Behind all his mockery of the big Mouse is an admission that Disney's big-screen sentiment ultimately sees off his small-screen yellow cleverness. Deep down, most of us are stupid and sentimental like Homer. Long after we forget why Spider-Pig was so funny, we will still be crying at Bambi's mother dying. ■

The Simpsons 20th anniversary edition will be broadcast in January

THE VISUAL CV

Martin Scorsese

It's been an immense career, but an uneven one. As Scorsese teams up again with Leonardo DiCaprio, TOM SHONE picks his eight best films

▲ **1973 Mean Streets**
The more films Scorsese made about the mob, the less he knew why. Shot for $300,000 by a 30-year-old (*above*), "Mean Streets" knows what it's for. It's one of the great debuts: a cock-of-the-walk movie with a skittering rhythm, half early Truffaut, half Ronettes song. Harvey Keitel's fondness for his wastrel cousin (Robert De Niro) is in every frame and De Niro has never been better: telling tall tales in a porkpie hat, he acts as if cinema was a species of practical joke. One scene ("He called me a mook. What's a mook?" "I dunno." "You can't call me a mook" etc) holds the seeds not just of Scorsese's career, but Tarantino's

◀ **1974 Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore**
Ellen Burstyn got Scorsese the gig, feeling that the tale of a mother and son going in search of a better life needed pepper. Again, the rhythm transfixes, as Burstyn and her boy (Alfred Lutter, *left*) riff like the Marx Brothers: nobody has caught the fond, fractious, flirtatious relationship between mothers and sons better. Scorsese – unnoticed, even by him – is a terrific director of women.

◀ **1976 Taxi Driver**
It could be another bittersweet movie about New York lonely hearts. Cybill Shepherd is working for a presidential nominee, with the cherubic Albert Brooks, when she is noticed by a stringy taxi driver (De Niro) with a cheeky grin. She says yes to a date. Bernard Herrmann's score swells. And...they watch a porn movie with sperm pulsing across the screen. "Taxi Driver" makes you shudder because it feels flush with De Niro's fever Jodie Foster (*left*) was overawed by him, so he took her out to breakfast every day and bored her awe away.

▶ **1980 Raging Bull**
You know it's a masterpiece because it's half black-and-white and has Mascagni on the soundtrack, but it's OK not to like it. "Raging Bull" is as bleak as they come. "Jake fought like he didn't deserve to live," said Scorsese, then ingesting enough cocaine to fell a buffalo. Is it the smuggled autobiography of an artist hitting rock bottom? De Niro (*right*) is a "thug Othello" in Pauline Kael's phrase, Joe Pesci lets fly with some brilliant filth, while Cathy Moriarty, at 19, moves with the sublunary grace of a woman who knows how not to get hit. It all feels like the thing La Motta most yearned for: punishment.

1985 After Hours
In 2000 Scorsese wrote a fan letter to Wes Anderson, praising the grace of his first two films. Some found this unlikely – a single snort from Jake La Motta's nostrils would destroy Anderson's fastidious world – but behind the glower of Scorsese's reputation lurks a more puckish talent; his rhythm is an inch away from great comic timing. If "The King of Comedy" was mere deconstruction, "After Hours" is the real deal, a screwball misadventure. It was his first film without De Niro in a decade and the giddiness is palpable; Rosanna Arquette (*left, with Griffin Dunne*) has a marvellously nutty soliloquy about sex and "The Wizard of Oz", neatly summarising the film's concerns.

1990 Goodfellas
Was it the detour into "The Last Temptation of Christ" that recharged his batteries? Whatever, "Goodfellas" was full-tilt film-making, and the first time Scorsese had combined the dark entropic trajectory that had come to fascinate him with the exuberant bravura of his early work. It's like watching a meteor self-immolate. Tellingly, De Niro was happy to sit mainly on the sidelines, leaving centre stage to Ray Liotta, who laughs like a hyena at the thuggery around him and tries to make peace with his wife (a punchy Lorraine Bracco), and to Joe Pesci (*right, with Liotta*), whose "Do I amuse you?" speech – funny, threatening, funny again, then threatening again – is a gem of spiralling dread.

2004 The Aviator
Think of one of Scorsese's trademarks: a fast tracking shot across a room towards an actor as he barks orders or fires a gun, and you see just how ill-suited he is to epic. He's an agoraphobic, a streetfighter, which makes the epics he made for Harvey Weinstein in the 1990s misbegotten. "The Aviator" at least beats "Gangs of New York" – an epic *about* an agoraphobic. The early scenes are dazzling, but as DiCaprio's Howard Hughes descends into bug-eyed paranoia, he fails to take us with him. The omens are not good for DiCaprio's and Scorsese's return to the psych ward in "Shutter Island" (February 19th)

2006 The Departed
When Scorsese finally won his Oscar, it wasn't for one of those tony epics, or his portrait of Dylan, but for this jackal of a picture, low and snarling. It was the Irish mob this time, given full-throated voice by the screenwriter William Monahan, with DiCaprio (*right, with Ray Winstone*), Jack Nicholson and Matt Damon caught up in a game of cat-and-mouse so cross-hatched with betrayal that only the rat in the closing credits knows what's going on. It's a strange centreless movie, beset by tonal wobbles, and climaxing in a bout of blood-letting so Jacobean in its intensity as to teeter into black comedy.

KOBAL. REX. DS PONA. D GRANT

ART

He's the tops

The art world is waking up to the brilliance of El Anatsui, who weaves beauty out of bottle tops. PAULA WEIDEGER meets him

El Anatsui, grey-haired and softly spoken, sat across from me on a black leather sofa in the lobby of a New York hotel. We had met to talk about his large and shimmering hangings. "I see myself as a person and an African," he began. And indeed he was born in Ghana and since 1975 has taught and sculpted at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He was quick to grasp what I was after when I asked a question but slow, sometimes very slow, to respond. The pauses between his words, between one sentence and the next, could be very long. It wasn't that he was worried about saying the wrong thing. Although he is a modest man, he appears solidly self-confident. His pauses seemed to exist to create spaces in which he could think. "Professionally," he finally added, "I see myself more as an artist in the world community of art." So he is. But the world community of art took rather a long time to confirm his view. Fortunately, he wasn't languishing.

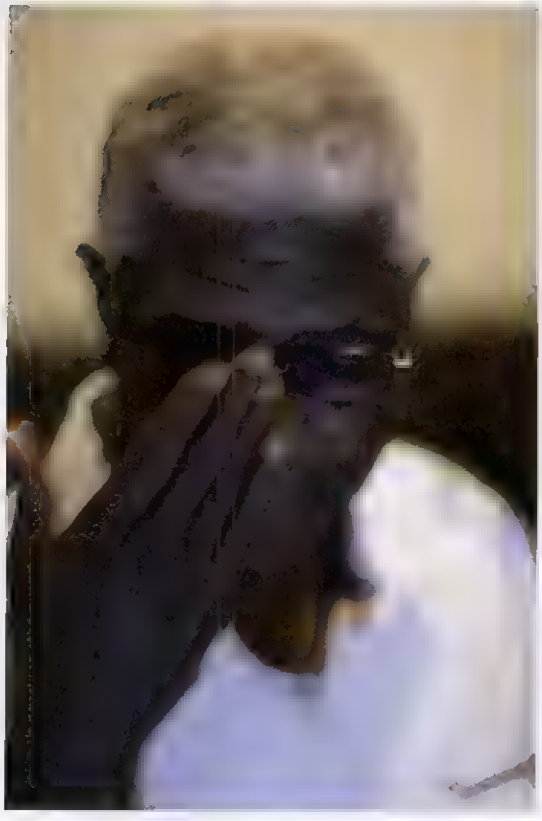
Anatsui has "a huge reputation", according to Chika Okeke-Agulu, a former student of his, now an art historian at Princeton. "He is one of the best-known names in (and I mean in the inside world of) contemporary Nigerian art. He is one of the leading figures associated with Nsukka School...arguably the most influential art school in Nigeria." Lagos, an hour's flight from Nsukka, has long had its own flourishing gallery scene and with that, active collectors. The novelist Chinua Achebe and the Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka are among those who own Anatsui's work. The October Gallery in London has been showing his work since the mid-1990s. In 2006 the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York acquired one of his pieces for its African gallery. But it was only in 2007, aged 63, that Anatsui leapt into the heart of the wider art world. His springboard was the Venice Biennale, where he had exhibited in 1990, without making much impact.

Robert Storr, dean of the Yale Art School and director of the biennale, invited Anatsui to show two pieces in the Arsenale. Like all his current work, they were large hangings made of thousands of pieces of shimmering metal, stitched together with copper wire. They are astonishingly beautiful and not like anything done before. Some think of them as tapestries; Anatsui calls them sheets. It is common to hear them compared to Byzantine mosaics, but the differences are greater than the similarities.

Anatsui's art is abstract. Colour, shape and light tell his story. In some pieces there are hundreds of dancing colours, while others are dominated by broad swathes of silver or gold or red. Unlike mosaics, these works are flexible; hanging free, they ripple as if they were cloth.

Anatsui was the hit of that biennale. Of the pieces in the Arsenale, one was bought by Kansas City's Nelson-Atkins Museum, the other for the Contemporary Collection of the Met. But his most talked-about work was a commission from the Belgian collector Axel Vervoordt for the Artempo installation at Palazzo Fortuny. "Fresh and Fading Memories, Part I-IV" was draped across the façade of this moody Gothic palace (*picture overleaf*). Wire fastenings were undone to let light into the upper floors – adding to the loveliness of the piece, making the sumptuous fabric look ripped. Interest in Anatsui has been building ever since.

In October 2008 at Sotheby's contemporary art sale in London, an Anatsui tapestry sold for $610,000, a world auction record for his work. (According to art-world gossip, one of his works has sold in the Middle East for over a million dollars. Vervoordt sold the Artempo piece, but will not disclose its price.) "Three Continents", a dazzling 2.4 metres by 4.5 hanging, the outline of which resembles a Mercator projection, is priced at $700,000 at New York's Jack Shainman gallery. (Several pieces by Anatsui will be included in Bonham's contemporary art auction in New York on February 24th.) Commissions keep coming, including



"I am a nomad"
Born and brought up in Ghana, El Anatsui has taught at art school in Nsukka, Nigeria, since 1975

PORTRAIT GRANT DELIN

"When I like where it is, it gets linked up"
"Fading Cloth" (2005), a typically shimmering piece by El Anatsui

one for a 12 metres by 3.6 piece to hang in the atrium of the Bill and Melinda Gates campus in Seattle.

"El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You About Africa", his first major retrospective, will open at the Royal Ontario Museum in October 2010. In February 2011 it reaches New York as the inaugural exhibition at the Museum for African Art now under construction on upper Fifth Avenue. As well as organising the retrospective, the MFAA has co-produced a 53-minute documentary, "Fold Crumple Crush: The Art of El Anatsui" by Susan Vogel, director of Columbia University Global Centres: Africa. It's an engaging, informative and sensitive look at his way of life and of working.

In the film we see Anatsui at his local internet shop, doing his e-mail. We watch the rusty red earth kick up behind him as he heads for the shed of a seamstress who will sew packaging for him. And he takes us to the spot where he first came upon a bag of the bottle tops that are now central to his work.

Many African artists prefer to work with materials found near to hand. But just why were there thousands of bottle tops on Anatsui's doorstep? The answer has to do with recycling. Drinkers return empty gin and whisky bottles to their local distiller, where they are refilled and given new caps. There is a keen market for the cast-offs. Melted down, they are transformed into cooking pots. Thirst being what it is, Anatsui has no trouble buying what he needs.

Some 20 men work on the hangings. They sit on the floor or hunch over tables in a large, open-plan studio. The round tops are cut out, the remaining aluminium is made into strips. Each element is pounded flat and pierced. Round ones are threaded together with round ones, strips with strips. Anatsui tells his crew what colour combinations he wants. These are then put together in sections, or units as he calls them. A unit might be two feet square or smaller.

"Working with the rings that hold the caps – that is very, very slow," Anatsui says. "A few inches in a day. But when you work with the shaft of the cap that is very fast, because the basic unit is big." Although he used to make preparatory drawings for his wood sculpture, he does no drawings for these pieces. "Now, I place things on the floor and move them around," he says. "When I like where it is, it gets linked up. There are a lot of permutations all along the route."

As the tapestry takes shape it begins to look like a giant jigsaw. But there is no pre-existing image. Even the artist may not know exactly what he's looking for >

OCTOBER GALLERY

> until it comes into existence on the studio floor.

"Fold Crumple Crush" will have its premiere at de Young Museum in San Francisco on February 13th. "El Anatsui", says Professor Vogel, "is the first black African artist continuing to live in Africa who is making work of a grandeur and depth that is going to last."

Anatsui knew he wanted to be an artist as a boy, but had no path to follow. "In my family", he says, "there were creative people like my father, my brother. Some were poets, others composed lyrics for dance groups, but there were no artists the way I am." He wasn't daunted. "I had a feeling that art was something I was going to enjoy. To enjoy is the most important thing." Towards the end of a rigorous secondary-school education, his enjoyment was interrupted by a phone call that brought a severe emotional shock.

Anatsui found out that the woman who had raised him and whom he believed was his mother was in fact a cousin. His birth mother had died when he was one. The revelation surely played some part in his decision to give himself a new name. Emanuel, the first of his given names, became El. For the rest, no one will say. Anatsui does not wish to have the subject discussed, which of course only adds to its psychological weight.

He has never married. A long-time colleague believes that in more than three decades, no member of his family has ever visited him at Nsukka. But he seems comfortable with strangers and has spent decades in lively exchanges with his students. He travels widely: "I am a nomad. Home is a psychological state, not a physical place. You carry it with you."

El Anatsui will soon retire from teaching. He is building a house on a bluff overlooking the campus, and will spend part of the year there, part in Ghana. He has already begun scouting Accra distilleries for bottle tops. "I am very much involved with the sheets," he says. "There is so much variety, there are so many new ways of handling it – new textures, new relations." ■

THE PLAYLIST

Built to last

David Hepworth, founder of several music magazines including "The Word", on the tunes he has loved this year

I'm the very worst person to ask what I've been listening to this year. I find the shuffle button on an iPod dissolves chronology. That seems only right. What is new anyway? Even allegedly cutting-edge contemporary music uses the body parts of songs ancient and modern. The best tunes still arrive unbidden from all sorts of people and places, providing us with new ways of listening and planting itches that we can never quite scratch. Which is why we play them so often.

JAMES MCMURTRY HURRICANE PARTY
Son of the novelist Larry, McMurtry has made a string of clever, ornery rock records that fans of Neil Young and Tom Waits would do well to attend to. This one features the line of the year: "I don't want another drink/I only want that last one again".

THE DUCKWORTH LEWIS METHOD JIGGERY POKERY
Two Irishmen, Neil Hannon and Thomas Walsh, make a funny, pointed, affectionate pop record about a single moment in cricket history: the ball with which Shane Warne bamboozled Mike Gatting in 1993. Howzat?

MULATU ASTATKE & THE HELIOCENTRICS
CHA CHA
He is the Duke Ellington of Ethiopian jazz. They are a London funk outfit with an iron hand on the groove. Together they've made the record I've played more than any other this year.

MOUNT ANALOG FEATURING KARL BLAU
THAT'S HOW I GOT TO MEMPHIS
This song, steeped in the emotional geography of country music, was written aeons ago by the Nashville legend Tom T. Hall. He can never have imagined how minty-fresh it would come up in this jazzy-indie treatment.

THE DOOBIE BROTHERS LISTEN TO THE MUSIC (DJ MALIBU MIX)
Somebody had the inspired idea of letting dance DJs loose on a collection of what you might call Hawaiian shirt music from the 70s (America, Maria Muldaur, George Benson, etc). It's airy, guilt-free and goes to show there's nothing pure about pop.

SPEECH DEBELLE THE KEY
If you travel on the top deck of a London bus you get plugged in to the constantly changing music of London speech. You also pick up some interesting information about how people live their lives. At its best, Debelle's Mercury prize-winning album is that journey set to music.

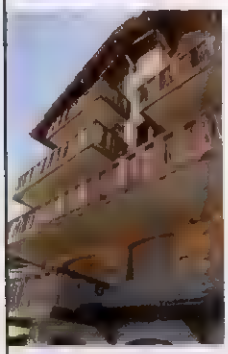
THE UNTHANKS
BECAUSE HE WAS A BONNY LAD
There isn't much contemporary English folk music that you could accuse of being sexy. But there's something about the way these Northumbrian female voices describe a flirtation that puts you right at the bus stop with them.

JESSE WINCHESTER STEP BY STEP
Some of the best things about "The Wire" are the montages that close each season. The first one goes out to this 30-year-old tune about failed saints. It works like you wouldn't believe and proves that all great records eventually have their moment.

All songs can be downloaded from iTunes or 7Digital, "Step by Step" only as part of an album

SWITZERLAND

chesterton humberts



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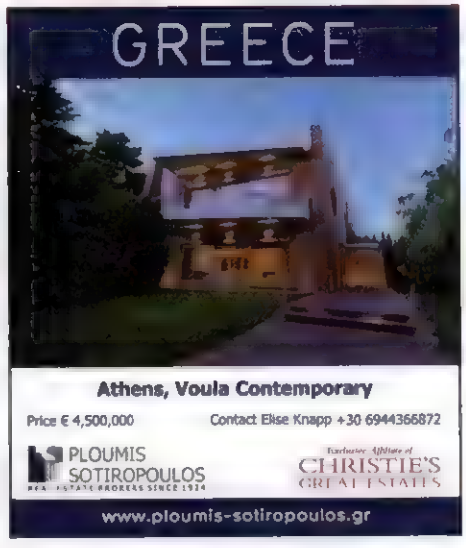

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PLACES

"Drunk on light"
The strange throbbing flare of the Aurora Australis, or the Southern polar lights

Up above down under

Tasmania's clear skies are made for eavesdropping on the stars. NICHOLAS SHAKESPEARE went to live there and found some odd links to the rest of this planet too

FOR MUCH OF the past decade I have lived on a nine-mile beach with no land between my deck and the ice floes of Antarctica. What anchored me here, initially, was the quality of the light, like an overexposed photograph, but possessing a clarity that I have not encountered elsewhere. Until I came to Tasmania, I never knew what it was to feel drunk on light – sunlight, moonlight, starlight, the strange throbbing flare of the Aurora Australis, or the double-rainbows that are as much a feature of Tasmania's east coast as its sudden winds. Here, unlike when I am in England – and escaped from what Robert Louis Stevenson called "the Bastille of civilisation" – I find it no hardship to rise with the sun and pick my way through the boobyalla for a barefoot tramp on the sand. There are mornings, before the south-easterly picks up, when the air is so clear and the water in the bay so glassy that I have the illusion of being able to see not merely to the lip of the horizon, but beyond it – back even to the damp northern island where I'm from.

Tasmania's air, some of the purest in the world, is cleansed by winds that hurtle in from Patagonia. The exceptional clarity of its sky makes the island an auspicious site for astronomers. My glass and cedar house, elevated on a dune, was once an observatory. It becomes so again on the evening that the president of the Tasmanian Astronomical Society hauls from his car a large object resembling a first-world-war mortar shell.

Through this same telescope 24 hours earlier, Phil Watkins had watched a NASA spacecraft pass on its way to supersede the Hubble telescope with another that hopes to be able to penetrate 13 billion light years into space.

Tonight, we cannot locate the moving pulse of light that is the spacecraft with the Swift Burst Alert Telescope on board, but we see the elliptical rings of >

> Saturn as they appeared 70 minutes beforehand; the small red dot of Mars; and in a blur over the bay, a co-galaxy seldom visible because of light pollution.

It's impossible not to share Phil's excitement, but what overcomes me is the sheer insignificance of our planet. It pulls me to ask him, childishly, whether he feels we can be the only living creatures out there.

Phil has been "gawking into space" for a long time. He is a scientist, and a trained pilot. He stares up into the sky. So many stars, like particles of sand.

It is now that I hear for the first time the name of Grote Reber.

"It's a pity you couldn't have asked him," he said. "If anyone had an answer, he did."

"Who's Grote Reber?"

And out it comes. The inventor of the satellite dish and pioneer of radio astronomy. Who had lived in Tasmania for almost 50 years, renting a field on an isolated farm where he built a telescope to rival Swift.

I'm suddenly back on terra firma. "Where is this field exactly?"

A BYWORD FOR remoteness, Tasmania is itself a sort of outer space on earth, but also one of those places far away from the so-called "centre" which intersects, even illuminates, our own history.

One November morning I woke to see, only a few yards from shore, a huge black shape suspended motionless in the air: the tail of a southern right whale. What books were written by whale-light, what assignations made, what cheekbones touched in the orange glow of its odd-scented flame, I have no idea, but I do know that for a brief period in the 1820s, many studies and street-lamps of London were illuminated by the oil of Tasmanian whales, harvested by convict crews operating out of five whaling-stations in Oyster Bay. Captain Ebor Bunker who sailed into this bay in 1803 on his way to set up the first European settlement on the Derwent, was so excited by the number of sperm whales in the water that he interrupted his mission to spear three of them. His expertise with the harpoon gave rise to the whaler's cry: "Lay me on, Captain Bunker! I'm hell on a long dart!"

Montaigne well observed how it became heresy to believe in the existence of the Antipodes. Confronted by glazed, haughty eyes – "Where is it you're living, Tanzania?" – I find myself making lists of unlikely ways in which Tasmania is arrowed to the centre...

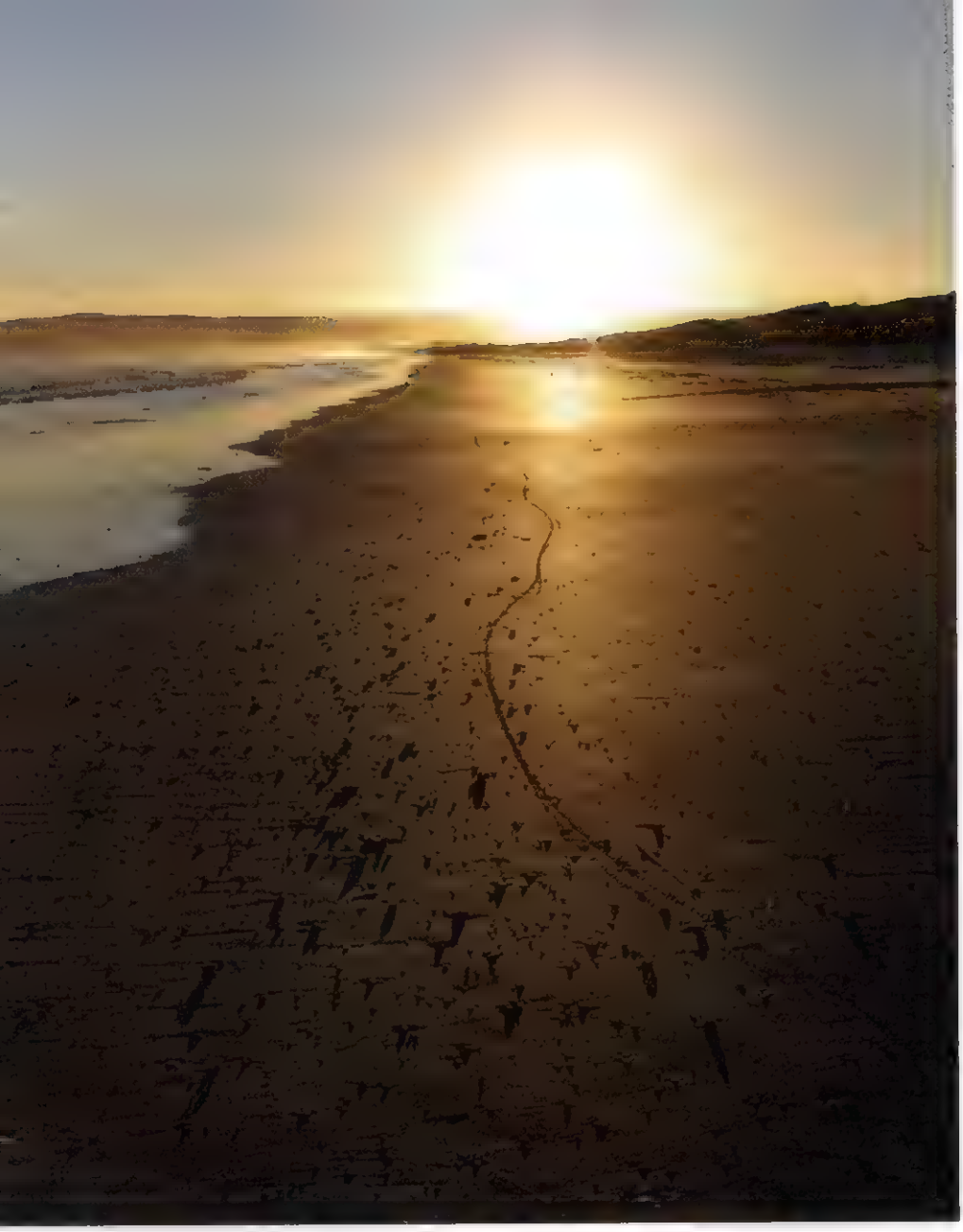
Those avenues of towering eucalyptus down which I trotted in my Argentine boyhood were most probably Tasmanian blue gums. First documented by French botanists at Recherche Bay, Tasmanian eucalypts were planted in 1856 in Santa Monica, California. Less than an hour's drive from where I live, Bob the Tinker in Tinker's Creek loaded cargo after cargo with seeds of the quick-growing timber. By the 1870s many of the ships that had transported whale oil were filled with blue-gum nuts bound for South America, Spain, Italy, France, Greece, Turkey, Abyssinia.

Wave studies
TOP Evening light at Oyster Bay, where the author has his house
ABOVE Grote Reber with one of his early toys – a radiometer

Then there's Darwin's monkey. One of my best friends along the beach is a Hobart architect, a big bear of a man who insisted on sketching out a plan that would transform my possum-infested, ripple-iron garage into a proper and light-flooded study. In Hobart Bill lives in a convict-built house that was once owned by the town's chief surveyor. He tells me how, not long ago, he was busy constructing a conservatory in his back garden when "quite deep down" his spade jangled against a strange skull.

He wrapped the skull up and carried it round the corner to a geologist at the university who took one look and told him that he was clutching the remains of a monkey. Not only that, but one that had in all probability belonged to none other than Charles Darwin.

NICHOLAS SHAKESPEARE (LEFT)



In February 1836 the *Beagle* moored in Hobart. Among the passengers to disembark was the 26-year-old Darwin, and clamped to his shoulder was a small pet monkey. Staying ten days looking for skinks and digging up rock-specimens, the naturalist celebrated his 27th birthday at Bill's house in Secheron Road. Here, Darwin passed "the most agreeable evenings since leaving England", spoilt only by the sudden death of his pet.

Darwin recovered swiftly enough from his loss and even considered putting down roots. "If I was obliged to emigrate I certainly should prefer this place: the climate and aspect of the country almost alone would determine me." Eighteen years on, unable to get Hobart out of his head, he wrote to his friend the botanist William Hooker: "I am always building veritable castles in the air about emigrating and Tasmania has been my headquarters of late; so that I feel very proud of my adopted country."

A ten-minute drive from Oyster Bay brings you to the ghost village of Llandaff and an incredibly poignant reminder of how history in Tasmania can lie disturbingly close to the surface. Llandaff was planned out in the 19th century by a government draughtsman 14,000 miles away in London: one of several Potemkin towns that were never built, but designed to be put on the map – with an imposing array of streets and civic buildings – in order to discourage a Russian invasion during the Crimean war. In point of fact, Llandaff never consisted of more than a cemetery and a single dwelling.

Tasmania is a byword for remoteness, a sort of outer space on earth

One late afternoon outside the yellow weatherboard shack that was Llandaff I met an old man in grey corduroy slippers holding a bucket of rainwater. When he saw that I wanted to see the cemetery, he offered to show me around.

We looked at the obelisk marking the grave of the first settler, William Lyne, a tall proud man from Gloucestershire who died from a bone that lodged in his throat as he was eating dinner. We looked at the grave of Lyne's son John, known as "Leghunter" on account of his sexual wanderings, who was responsible for the extinction of the Tasmanian tiger, after proposing a motion, as the local MP, to pay £1 for every adult carcass presented and ten shillings for every pup. And we stood before the adjacent marble gravestones of a young woman shot dead at Port Arthur on April 28th 1996, when a Tasmanian man coolly mowed down 35 people outside the Broad Arrow Café, and of her mother who died on the same day, of shock upon hearing the news.

The graves prompted my guide to divulge the recent death of his own wife, a woman he had discovered was schizophrenic only a few months after marrying her. His married life had consisted of one long unhappy vigil, every day on clenched alert to make sure that all razor blades and knives never came within reach of her unstable grasp. Although relieved not to have any children in case they had inherited her illness, he was lonely in Llandaff, and I could see that he was pleased to have someone to talk to, even though we were talking in a cemetery.

He told me that he used to work on the railways in Burnie, in northern Tasmania, where he was born, and that his father had sailed to Tasmania 100 years before.

"Where from?"

"London," he said. "My family owned a hotel there. It was named after us."

Only mildly curious, I asked his name.

He looked at the ground and said: "Raymond. Raymond Charles Claridge."

"But Claridge's is still going! It's probably the world's most exclusive hotel."

>

"The sun's children"
Rainbows, as described in a myth that has survived from Tasmanian aboriginal culture

> "Really?" He rubbed his chin and glanced around for his bucket with which he had been about to water his fruit trees. He didn't trust what I was saying, I could tell.

I failed to give credence to his story until, a few months later, I stayed at Claridge's and asked the manager about its history. Sure enough, the hotel was founded by William and Marianne Claridge (he pointed out her portrait in the lobby) who, falling on hard times, sold up and emigrated he didn't know where.

BEAUTIFUL THOUGH THE day is, the beauty of the Tasmanian night can be more mesmerising still. Stevenson knew what a special pleasure it was to lie awake beneath the Southern skies, as on every visit I make a rule of doing – on one occasion the night sky was so bright that it had turned blue. "Night is a dead monotonous period under a roof, but in the open world it passes lightly, with its stars and dew and perfumes...What seems a kind of temporal death to people choked between walls and curtains, is only a light and living slumber to the man who sleeps in a field. All night long he can hear nature breathing deeply and freely."

The Tasmanian aborigines believed that the sun came from England, and also the moon – in the shape of a woman. According to George Augustus Robinson, a 19th-century lay missionary who lived with the aborigines and was almost unique in speaking their language, "the moon came from England and stopped at Oyster Bay." Robinson went on to describe a haunting Tasmanian aboriginal myth, one of the few to endure that people's disappearance: how the moon was roasting abalone on the beach when the sun came and swept her away and she, tumbling into the fire, was hurt on her side and then rolled into the sea and afterwards went up into the sky and stopped there with her kindred, the sun. "They say that the rainbow is the sun's children."

IT'S A STILL, sunny morning in May when I drive an hour and a half to the hamlet of Bothwell, where the man who mapped the heavens lived in obscurity. Few houses along the main street are without a grey metal plate tilting from their front wall. I picture the images being beamed into sitting rooms in Tasmania and elsewhere – thanks largely to Grote Reber.

News that this gangly recluse was none other than the inventor of the first satellite dish staggered most of the congregation who attended his memorial service on a hot January day in 2003. If they ransacked their minds, they could remember a nerd with bulbous eyes, "as if he had come from under a stone", who motored around Bothwell in an electric car that he called Pixie. They remembered the talk he gave at the local historical society. "I thought he was standing on loose floorboards," Mary Ramsay told me. "He started talking and farting until old Mrs Webb leaned over and said 'What a pity he had onions for tea.' " Mostly, they remembered a bald American with little social grease who liked his tucker, especially if it was provided by someone else, and was mean with everything but his time. "He used the school laboratory to weigh fruit peelings in order to test which was the cheapest fruit to buy, and on 'bring a plate' occasions would bring an empty plate and go home with it piled high, or else with food stuffed into his towel cap." Hardly anyone in this tiny community connected the tight-fisted figure they called Kermit with their ability to watch live cricket from Melbourne, Loony Tunes cartoons from Los Angeles, or porn from the Netherlands.

"They saw him as a funny old guy on a bicycle," said Henry Edgell.

But the satellite dish wasn't Reber's only achievement.

I drive on to Henry Edgell's farm at Denistoun, five miles north of Bothwell. Here, in the 1960s, Reber paid £50 a year to rent a 300-acre field where he built what amounted, in its physical dimensions, to the world's largest radio-telescope.

Before taking me out to the site, Edgell produces a folder of papers and letters about his former tenant, and leaves me to read it.

Grote Reber believed "the Big Bang is bunk". His mother had taught Hubble

The person who emerged was a lone star, the son of a lawyer from Illinois and a domineering German schoolteacher who called him after her surname. A radio ham from his teens, Reber believed that "the Big Bang is bunk" and that Western cosmology was born in the dark and had remained there ever since. His mother had taught the astronomer Edwin Hubble. On the sole occasion they met, Reber asked Hubble what >

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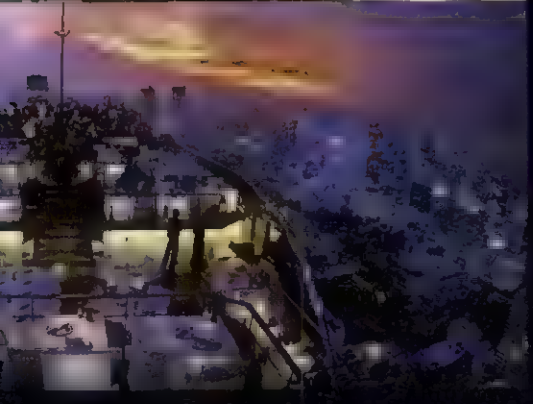

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> kind of new and interesting observations could be made. "He had no suggestions to offer," Reber noted.

In his Illinois backyard, Reber determined to chart this void. Aged 22, he read an article by Karl Jansky, a young engineer briefly employed by the Bell Telephone Company to investigate radio interference on transatlantic cables: Jansky had detected a fuzzy stream of radio signals that appeared to issue from the sun. Reber, anxious to follow this up, failed to interest any university or observatory in giving him funds, and yet if he believed in anything it was himself: "I consulted with myself and decided to build a dish." Using his own materials – chickenwire and hardwood mainly – he erected a 31ft parabolic reflector in the adjacent yard. What for a decade remained the world's first and only radio-telescope, and the model for all satellite receiving dishes, stands now at the entrance of the Green Bank National Radio Astronomy Observatory in Virginia. At the time, his mother found it good for hanging the washing on.

For two years, Reber spent his nights with ears cupped to the skies – the interference from the spark plugs of cars making it impossible to listen by day. Then, one night in 1938, Reber turned down the frequency and heard a "cosmic noise" coming from the direction of the Milky Way.

The weak hisses uttered by the stars allowed Reber to survey invisible galaxies and to create what is commonly recognised as the first detailed radio-map of the sky. But his work was unfinished.

Telescopic sights
BOTTOM The earthly remains of the world's first radio-telescope lie in the field where it was built
BELOW Henry Edgell, who owns the field, examines parts of Reber's colossal invention

The presence of an unusual hole in the ionosphere plus the absence of man-made electrical interference made Tasmania one of the best locations in the world for eavesdropping on the universe.

Reber decided to go and live there.

Edgell drives me out to the flat field where Reber set up a circle of 192 telegraph poles. The green-painted eucalypt poles were Reber's "telescope": a radio lens one mile across and strung with a grid of copper-clad steel wire.

The wires – suspended at a height to allow cattle to graze underneath – converged into a weatherboard hut in the middle of the field, where, powered by a car battery, a machine recorded heavenly static at the low frequency of 2.1 megahertz.

"If there's anything out there, they'll find us," Reber believed. "Remember that Jansky wasn't looking for cosmic static. It found him."

For two decades, Reber sat in his Antipodean hut, eating sweet turnips that he had picked from somebody else's paddock and poring over the meaning of signals that had travelled 5,000m years or more, emitted before our planet existed. But whatever the signals communicated to him, he failed to communicate to others. In 1977, he published a paper in which he wrote: "The material universe extends beyond the greatest distances we can observe optically or by radio means. It is boundless..." One year later, he abandoned his hut.

Beneath the circling eye of two wedge-tailed eagles, Edgell guides me to the remains of Reber's colossal radio-telescope. It's not much: a wooden box of insulators and pulleys, a jumble of concrete weights and a pile of carelessly stacked telegraph poles hewn from Tasmanian blue gums.

As I look at the poles, I remember a letter in Edgell's folder, written to Edgell's father from Reber's nearby house in Bothwell: "My rear fence here needs repair. I'd appreciate having you arrange to have some of these poles cut into six-foot lengths for eight fence posts and brought to me here. Thanks."

Perhaps it was inevitable that the boundlessness of the universe would lead Reber to crave what we all crave: the cosy reassurance of some kind of enclosed space, of a den, of four walls, or, in my case, of a study. Even my deck – a promontory – is encircled by rails. Robert Frost wrote that "good fences make good neighbours". How much more so, my time in Tasmania has taught me, when your neighbour is the immensity of the cosmos. ■

NICHOLAS SHAKESPEARE

THIS QUARTER'S QUARTERS

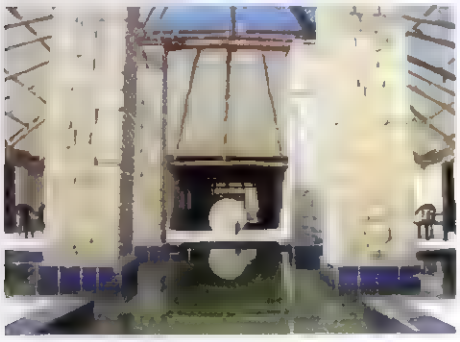
Unrefined rooms

ADAM ROBERTS unearths hotels built of nature's raw materials and little else

THE HOTEL CHAINS that stretch their tentacles around the globe may succeed in giving their guests reliable standards, but often they display a sameness that seems to defeat the whole point of travelling. Surely a hotel should reflect its surroundings and have a sense of place? Today you are as likely to find Balinese-style interiors in the Caribbean or the Serengeti as you are in Indonesia. Even the exquisitely tasteful and much-imitated Amanresorts group, which does a deft line in cleaned-up versions of vernacular style, is far removed from the real thing.

For travellers who prize the authentic above all else, there are some one-off hotels that are built out of local materials to the point where they are literally part of their locations. Here are five that use building materials which have been processed as little as possible. Each is in its element, and also made of it.

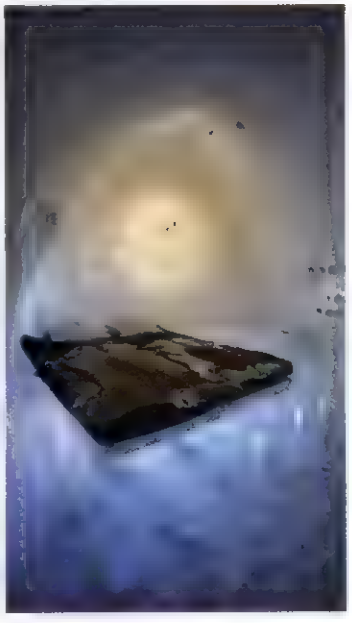
▲ **STONE Le Grotte della Civita** Matera, Italy
The *sassi* of Matera, in southern Italy, are prehistoric caves which have been lived in for the past 9,000 years, and where Pasolini filmed his "Gospel According to St Matthew". Recently opened, Le Grotte offers the most intense troglodyte experience in town, with rough rock walls and chunky furniture made of reconditioned iron and reclaimed wood. The 18 rooms are lit, in part, by candles, and one is inside a deconsecrated church carved from the rock. There are no televisions or telephones, and it's all the better for that. *Rooms from €225 per night; www.sassidimatera.com*



▶ **VEGETATION Kizingo** Lamu, Kenya
Hunkered in the sand dunes at the southern tip of Lamu island, the eight rooms at this laid-back hotel are built of local mangrove poles and woven palm leaves, with roofs of palm thatch that let the warm trade winds in under the eaves. Each banda (hut) has a large double bed, shower, loo and verandah with hammock, and is powered by its own solar panel. It's as Crusoe as you can go while still having sanitation, hot water and lighting. *Rooms from $390 per night, full board; www.kizingo.com*

▲ **SALT Hotel Palacio de Sal** Uyuni, Bolivia
In the dazzlingly beautiful salt plain more than 3km above sea level in the Bolivian Andes is this quirky hotel which has become a destination for travellers exploring the plateau. Slabs of salt are stacked to make walls, tables, chairs, beds, pillars, everything. It has a sauna, steam room and a pool filled with, yes, salt water. Bring your shades to fend off salt-blindness, and don't lick the walls: the salt crystals are big and rough. *Rooms from $180 per night, half board; www.palaciodesal.com*

◀ **MUD Hotel Djenné Djenno** Djenné, Mali
Anyone tired of Timbuktu should head to Djenné, also in central Mali, to see a town majestically crafted from mud. It rarely rains, otherwise the great mosque, much of the town centre, and this stylish little hotel would soon be washed away. Opened in 2006 by an adventurous Swede, it has interiors decorated with Malian bogolan fabrics – guests can even take a course in this traditional mud painting in the studio next door. *Rooms from $55 per night; www.hoteldjennedjenno.com*



◀ **ICE Icehotel** Jukkasjärvi, Sweden
Each year 3,000 tonnes of ice are cut from the frozen Torne river near the Swedish village of Jukkasjärvi, 200km north of the Arctic Circle. From that, during November and December, the Icehotel is built, with several dozen rooms. An outer layer of snow stops it melting on sunny days. You bed down on a slab of ice draped with reindeer skins, rooms contain ice sculptures and cocktails are served in the cold stuff too (drink fast, wear gloves). Inside the temperature never drops below a balmy -8 °C. So it's just as well you wake to a sauna and hot lingonberry juice. Hurry, though – the hotel melts back into the river each April. *Rooms from $540 B&B; www.icehotel.com*

ALAMY

BEING THERE

Brussels

In the abstract the city tends to make people grumpy, but for DAVID RENNIE, who lives there, the reality is an abundance of small pleasures that add up to a charming whole

SOME TOWNS ARE best visited in the imagination. Real magic is conjured, in the abstract, by places like Samarkand, Alice Springs or Harbin. Yet the magic that wreathes their names and histories barely survives contact with those cities' shabby, dusty reality. Other towns are enchanting to visit, but can be hard work to live in for years – Beijing springs to mind.

My latest hometown, Brussels, turns each of those patterns on its head. Contemplated in the abstract – as the capital of the European Union, the capital of Belgium and even as the capital of the Dutch-speaking region of Flanders – Brussels makes a lot of people grumpy. Eurosceptics loathe "Brussels" as the fount of meddlesome Euro-rules, or the seat of a federalist plot. A growing number of Belgians from Flanders (who make up 60% of the population) have fallen out of love with their squabbling, divided country, and thus feel no tug of loyalty to their national capital. And although the Flemish are determined to hang on to Brussels as their regional capital for territorial and economic reasons, few show real affection for it.

Equally, Brussels is not really suited to brief visits. At weekends, the city's handful of famous sights is thronged with glum-looking visitors, wondering what to do next. You can see them eating overpriced mussels and frites in the tourist traps off the Grand'Place, or emerging from a new museum dedicated to the Belgian surrealist René Magritte, wondering if such a talent truly deserves a large gallery all to himself. A linguist with a sensitive microphone could collect the disappointed words "Is that it?" in a hundred different tongues, just by spending a day near the Mannekin Pis, a tiny statue of a naked boy, peeing ceaselessly thanks to a plastic hose piped visibly into his bottom.

Yet in the real, everyday world, there is another Brussels that is anything but uptight or dull: a polyglot place that is home to a million people, more than half of them of foreign origin. This city has little in common with the various abstract versions of "Brussels" that make people so cross, or bored. This Brussels reveals its delights only slowly. In short, you have to live in Brussels to love it.

I have lived in capital cities almost all my life: London, then Beijing, Washington, DC, and now Brussels. The Belgian capital has been my home twice: once as a student 16 years ago, and now since 2005 as a foreign correspondent with a young family. I have loved it both times, but not for grand, sweeping reasons. Brussels is a city of small pleasures.

There's its modest size: a 20-minute tram ride takes you from the city centre to the Forêt de Soignes, 4,000 hectares of beech woods and bridle paths on the south-eastern fringe. It is also a spontaneous city: the opposite of London, where dinner parties must be planned six weeks ahead. Part of this is its transitory nature: because half of its inhabitants are from somewhere else or just passing through on a posting, people are not so fixed into rigid networks of family and friends. In the overlapping worlds I inhabit – the Euro-world of people linked to the EU and the world of Brussels parents with young children – impromptu picnics or weekend brunches are easy to arrange.

Despite its small size, the city rarely feels overcrowded. Head to a popular spot like the Bois de la Cambre, a central park, on a sunny weekend, and there is always room for one more game of Frisbee or kick-about on the lawns leading down to the lake, and somehow always a few last bicycles left to hire (at low subsidised rates) from the temporary rental stand that operates in summer months. Nothing is very large, everything is shared. Our favourite playground is a Babel with swings: the air is filled with a dozen European languages, plus Arabic, Turkish and still more exotic tongues. Inside the Euro-tribe of Brussels, children learn to try both English and French on any new

Rarely overcrowded
ABOVE Drizzle-free shopping in the Galeries Royales Saint-Hubert
LEFT Bakeries rival those in Paris for quality but not snootiness
BELOW The endearingly odd BELvue museum

child they meet: one of the two always works.

There are the nicely old-fashioned bars, where customers gather to talk, fine beers are served with plates of cubed cheese, and satellite sports shows do not blare from corner televisions. The climate is dreadful, but locals pretend otherwise. In winter it can look like Bucharest: grey, drizzly and bleak. But at the merest hint of spring, tables and chairs appear outside every café, and the city pretends to be Marseilles, undeterred by average summer temperatures of 17°C, and frequent rain.

The sights of Brussels are rarely world-class. In compensation, many are endearingly odd. I am obscurely fond of the small BELvue museum, tacked onto the (ugly) royal palace and dedicated to modern Belgian history. The BELvue's strangest relic is a smart corduroy jacket in a glass case. It was the coat worn by King Albert I when he fell off a small but lethal cliff in 1934. The jacket has been cleaned of gore, but bears a nasty tear in its right sleeve.

It is a place to eat well, if heartily. I was an intern at the European Commission in 1993, and those student days are brought straight back by the sweet, burnt-sugar aroma of freshly baked waffles, drifting up from metro-station entrances. Outsiders will tell you that Belgians only eat their fried potatoes with mayonnaise. In fact, locals are not nearly so purist, sousing their frites with things like curry sauce (a lurid yellow gloop) or consuming them in a *mitraillette*—this disgusting innovation, which literally means "submachinegun", crams potatoes, sauce, onions and deep-fried meat into a half-baguette sandwich. Belgian chips, in truth, are not my thing. My weakness is for the bakeries, the best of which match Paris for quality, but not for snootiness, and sell croissants hot from the back door, at any hour of the night.

Today, the city is a bit less shabby, though its pavements are still studded with unrivalled deposits of dog excrement. There is still beauty beneath the grime. Small public gardens fill odd corners of the city, including an entire "secret park" hidden behind Rue Faider in the district of Ixelles, reached through the coaching entrance of a house. My walk to work takes me past tree-lined squares filled with Art Nouveau gems, and cobbled backstreets as quiet as country lanes. Only the last few moments of my walk bring me into the European Quarter, a brutal zone of glass and concrete canyons, cut through by smoggy urban motorways.

Belgium is a young country which grew rich suddenly, thanks to coal and steel, but also, alas, the pil- >

Going native

WHERE TO STAY

Brussels is a political town, with its own ideas about status. The grandest hotels are good but not palatial (visitors with real Brussels clout stay at an ambassador's residence).

The Stanhope Easily the best in the European Quarter. In summer ask to eat in the garden courtyard. +32 (0)2 506 9111; www.stanhope.be

The Amigo Luxury a short walk from the Grand'Place. The area is a bit touristy, but the hotel is calmly clubbish. +32 (0)2 547 47 47; www.hotelamigo.com

WHERE TO EAT

The high temples of Brussels gastronomy, like **Comme Chez Soi** (+32 (0)2 512 29 21, www.commechezsoi.be) or the **Villa Lorraine** (+32 (0)2 374 31 63, www.villalorraine.be) deserve their Michelin stars, but tradition may teeter into stuffiness.

For serious French food in a more urban setting, try **L'Idiot du Village**, a cosily decorated spot where EU commissioners dine next to local couples on dates. 19 Rue Notre-Seigneur, +32 (0)2 502 55 82.

For moules frites as locals eat them, **Le Pré Salé** offers the real thing in an authentically noisy, white-tiled setting. Some hate it, others swear by their *carbonnade flamande* (a beef and beer stew). Rue de Flandre 20. +32 (0)2 513 65 45.

STREETWISE

Despite the drizzle, Brussels lends itself to exploring on foot. The **Grand'Place** is a spectacular example of Flemish town architecture, and must be seen once, though the crowds quickly become overwhelming. A step away is a trio of handsome 19th-century covered shopping arcades, the **Galeries Royales Saint-Hubert**. For a relaxing >

drink or snack, head to the other town square of central Brussels, the **Place du Grand Sablon**, lined with fine cafés. A short walk uphill is the main museum district. Be selective: the **Royal Museums of Fine Arts** have some treasures, including fine Bruegels, but many rooms are badly hung.

WHAT TO SEE

The Atomium is a giant assembly of gleaming steel balls connected by hidden escalators, built for the 1958 World Expo, in a northern suburb of the city. It represents an iron crystal, magnified 165 billion times and has been carefully restored. www.atomium.be

The newest museum in town is dedicated to the Belgian surrealist, **René Magritte**. Beat the queues by buying a timed entrance ticket for later in the day, or buy online. www.musee-magritte-museum.be

For die-hard **Tintin** fans, a splendid new museum dedicated to his creator, Hergé, has just opened in the university town of Louvain-la-Neuve, housed in a lovely modernist building. Tintinologists will swoon over the wealth of archive material, but young children will grow skittish. www.museeherge.com

SHOPPING

Pierre Marcolini is the best of the chocolate chains (1 rue des Minimes, at the bottom of the Place du Grand Sablon). The same Sablon area houses many antique shops, including dealers in African and tribal art. A happy exception to the horrid souvenir shops near the Grand'Place is the official **Tintin shop**, just off the square at 13 rue de la Colline. It is a good, if expensive reminder that Brussels is the home town of the legendary boy reporter.

Mobility in Brussels
TOP AND LEFT Local means of transport have a nostalgic air
ABOVE Playgrounds are a miniature League of Nations

> laging of the Congo. The boom left its mark: great swathes of the city boast streets of high-ceilinged mansions built in a 30-year burst after 1880. Many have sweeping staircases, fine stonework and marble fireplaces. Some are inhabited by ambassadors, others are chopped into tiny flats and shared by migrant Moldovans, Turks or students.

An estimated 115,000 people live in Brussels because of the EU, and this Euro-crowd can be a cliquish world, with many inside it having few or no Belgian friends. That is not all the foreigners' fault: native Belgians are understandably wary of investing in Euro-friends who keep leaving every few years. Many Bruxellois are none too fond of Eurocrats buying up houses with their large EU salaries (which are exempt from Belgian income tax). Some say these tensions are getting worse, as EU enlargement brings new members of the Euro-tribe. Arriving for the second time in 2005 I was struck by how few Eurocrats now exercise the right to special "Euro" number plates for their cars. A different colour from ordinary Belgian plates and adorned with 12 gold stars, these apparently invite a key along the paintwork. Legend has it that the only people who embrace them are Eurocrats from France, so that when they drive home to visit Maman they are not mistaken for Belgians (the horror).

You will often hear foreigners praise Brussels for its easy links to other cities. That can betray a reluctance to put down roots, especially among young singletons left cold by the charms of playgrounds, parks and weekend cycle rides in the forest. On a Friday afternoon the fast Thalys train to Paris and the Eurostar to London are packed with French or British twenty-somethings fleeing the Belgian capital for the weekend. They are missing out.

But then, the same is true for many Belgians who work in the city. This can be a tribal town. Almost half the jobs in Brussels are filled by Flemish commuters, a quarter of a million of them arriving each morning from strait-laced towns like Vilvoorde, Aalst or Boom. Yet few linger after work, hurrying straight from their desks to their cars, or to the crammed railway platforms of the Gare Centrale.

A very different tribe is the "Dansaert Flemish" – a trendy, open-minded bunch of Dutch-speakers who live around the Brussels street of that name. Then there are the many faces of immigrant Brussels. These can be well-established, from the African district of Matongé to the Turks of Saint-Josse, or the French tax-exiles holed up in leafy Uccle. Some are brand new, like the Polish enclave in Saint-Gilles (whose territory is shared with older, less visible communities of Portuguese, Spanish, Italian and Greek descent). Above all, there is the growing Maghreb Arab community, the self-styled "Maroxellois" of Schaerbeek, Anderlecht and the streets round the Gare du Midi. Theirs is a different Brussels from mine, and yet the same one: a charming, ill-kempt place that belongs to none of us and all of us.

No absolute truths apply to Brussels, as the Flemish academic Nadia Fadil wrote in her 2008 essay, "Thank God we have Brussels." Everything said about the city is relative, she concluded, because "talking about Brussels reveals your identity, says something about the circles in which you move, the position you occupy." She is right. Brussels should not be contemplated in the abstract, but only as a place to live. And as that it is a very fine place indeed. ■

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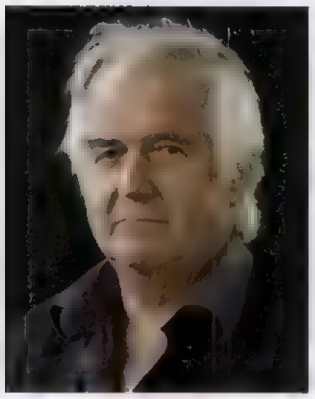


Best known as creator of the detective Kurt Wallander (whom he says he wouldn't like if he were real), Henning Mankell, 61, is also a playwright, theatre director and children's author. He lives in Sweden and Mozambique, with "one foot in the snow and one in the sand", and works with AIDS charities such as the Memory Book project, which helps parents leave their life stories for their children. He tells REBECCA WILLIS about his world

1 CITY **TIMBUKTU, MALI**

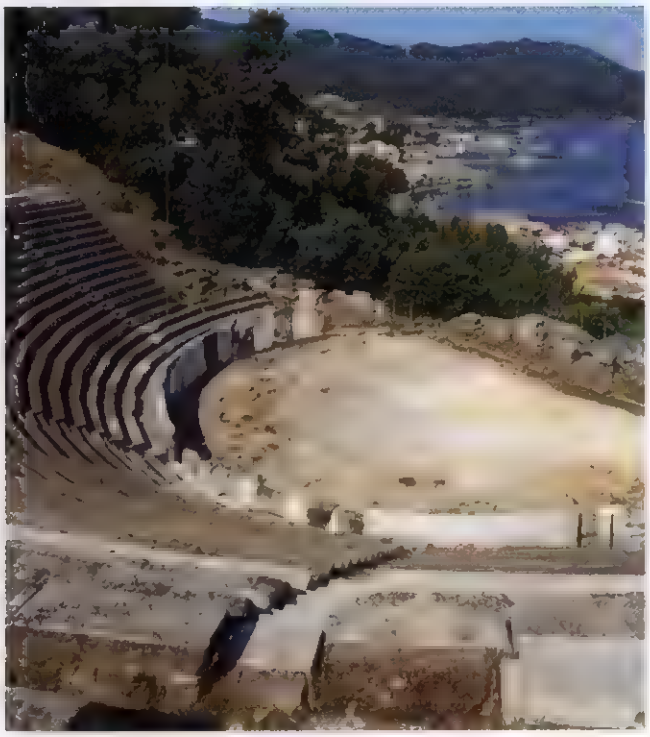
Timbuktu has been an almost mythological city in my life. It seems to be in the middle of nowhere and I still remember reading about it as a child. When I finally went there it was very interesting: there are some of the world's most outstanding libraries, with very old manuscripts that survived because they had been buried in dry sand. It is often said that the African continent has no written history, but Timbuktu tells us that is a blatant lie. And there is another reason. When I was in Timbuktu a few years ago, once at night I saw something that I will never forget. I saw on the pavement under a street lamp a young girl sitting reading. She didn't have any light in her house but she was sitting there completely lost in the book.

3 BEACH **BUBAQUE ISLANDS, GUINEA BISSAU**

When I first went to this archipelago many years ago I had a feeling of paradise – almost too much paradise. I have never seen anything like it in my life. There were no people on some of these islands, you were completely alone, and they had absolutely the most marvellous beaches I ever saw in my life. There are many islands and some are so close that you could swim from one to the next. Guinea Bissau was a Portuguese colony and Spinola, one of the fascist generals, had a summer house on one of the islands. I like walking on a beach if I have something to think about, but I can't be sleeping or lying on the beach all day; for me that's ridiculous

2 JOURNEY **ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA**

My choice is a journey that I haven't done yet, but I will do it before I die if I do not die now. It is to go to Australia and have the chance to spend some time with the aboriginals and to meet them and learn about their philosophy, about dreamtime, about the rock paintings, to have the privilege to be with these people. I plan to go in about a year. Some of the aboriginals, together with the San people in the Namibian desert, are the people living in the oldest ways: they have a straight connection to a time so far away that we don't know anything about it. Some people go to Santiago de Compostela, but I would like to go to the cathedral made without stones among the aboriginals and their rock paintings. I would like to experience that during my life, maybe to understand something more about human beings.



5 WORK OF ART "NIGHTHAWKS" BY EDWARD HOPPER

What I find so interesting about this painting is that it is really a sort of story. You don't know what has happened before or what will happen later, but there is a story going on. Whenever I see it, I have an urge to enter the painting and sit with these people and see what will happen. When paintings are really working you want to participate in them, that is why I chose "Nighthawks". I always see new things in it. I have started to write a play about it where the setting is exactly what you see in the painting.

6 VIEW MY WIFE (WITH SEA)

My favourite view must be the view of my wife's face, because when I see her it is the most astounding thing in my life – the fact that she is there and she is smiling and I am so happy. Her name is Eva Bergman and she is a theatre director [and Ingmar Bergman's daughter; they married in 1998] If I had to choose a background it would be the sea where we live south of Gothenburg. From our house we can see some islands and then out to the open sea. It can be very stormy and we live on a sort of cliff, it's like living in a boat. But my wife's face has to be in the foreground.

4 BUILDING AMPHITHEATRE, THASSOS, GREECE

When I first came to the amphitheatre almost 35 years ago it was half buried. There was no one there, no tourists, and suddenly I had a very strong feeling that I was surrounded by colleagues from thousands upon thousands of years. I work in the theatre as a writer and director, and I honestly had this feeling that I am a link in a chain that started here thousands of years ago, the feeling of being part of a tradition. There have been a lot of people before me and there will be a lot of people after me. I have been back to Thassos a couple of times as a sort of pilgrimage. It was a wonderful feeling and I will never forget that moment.

7 HOTEL NAME UNKNOWN, PEMBA, MOZAMBIQUE

Up north in Mozambique, close to the border with Tanzania, is a small city called Pemba. Within it is a very small hotel, and in the room where I stay there is a huge tree growing. When they built that house many years ago they left the tree there, and now it takes up half the room and bathroom. The enormous trunk is inside the room and it goes up through the roof and disappears. I think, symbolically, it doesn't have a name. There are a lot of beach hotels in Pemba, but this is in the city itself away from the tourists.

The Man from Beijing is published by Harvill Secker in February. Henning Mankell's previous novels are published in paperback by Vintage.

CORBIS, ALAMY, PETER ANDERSSON

SNAPSHOT

Maldives
Malé

Resembling the strange progeny of a cruise ship and Tracy Island, Malé is the face of the Maldives that the brochures don't show. The Maldives has 1,192 islands, and those developed for tourism are not the ones inhabited by locals; Malé, the capital city, is home to nearly a third of the Maldives' population of 300,000. This segregation is only natural in a Muslim nation (the world's smallest) which encourages bikini-clad visitors: the number of resorts grew from two in 1972 to 92 by the end of 2007. But if the paradise experience offered by the hotels is a clever confection, an escapist fantasy, the money they bring in is real enough. Tourism has overtaken fishing as the Maldives' biggest earner of foreign currency.

If you're wondering why you can't see a fringe of sandy shores, it's because Malé has faced up to another reality. After serious flooding in 1987, a 3.5 metre-high sea wall of concrete tetrapods was built around the island's 450 acres. In the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004, none of the country's 80-plus fatalities was on Malé and massive destruction was avoided because of the wall. But while it may help against tidal surges, the wall will be no defence against the rising sea levels promised by global warming: this is the world's lowest country, at an average of only 1.5 metres above sea level. Malé's neighbouring island, Hulhumalé, is higher—and completely man-made, but raising the whole country would be prohibitively expensive. The radical solution, which President Mohamed Naheed has said he is considering, is to move the whole population to somewhere higher and drier. While the big guys talk about controlling emissions, the people of the Maldives can attempt only to control their own destiny. They don't want to be the world's first climate-change refugees, an entire nation fleeing from its drowned land. ~ REBECCA WILLIS

PHOTOGRAPH **CHARLIE MAHONEY**

Up to scratch

Club DJ-ing can't be that hard, can it? WILL SMITH takes a class with DJ Daredevil

"YOU'LL BE RUBBISH." That's what my oldest friend said when he heard that I was having a go at scratch DJ-ing. Fair enough. Ask most people I know what I'd be better at than DJ-ing, and they would probably say cage-fighting. But I have as my teacher DJ Daredevil (real name Ben), a world scratching championship finalist. After a couple of lessons, the plan is to guest DJ at his club night in a London bar. Can I pull this off? Or is it like thinking you can do a space walk after spending one afternoon on a trampoline?

I grasp how the decks work pretty quickly. There are two turntables and a crossfader that lets you play two records at once: you push the fader to the left or right so that one deck plays while you change the record on the other. But the artistic side is more tricky, as I'm not that familiar with hip-hop or dance music. I quite like disco, but now is perhaps not the time to confess my sincere belief that Boney M's "Nightflight to Venus" is a terrific album.

After quitting accountancy, Daredevil now DJs full-time. He'd have made a dreadful accountant. You can't go through your VAT return with someone tapping out beats on their calculator. He's a great teacher, which is lucky because my knowledge of scratching is much like my dad's. We start with DJ Q Bert's "Super Seal Breaks", an album of samples and beats that, apparently, everyone should have – it's the "Queen's Greatest Hits" of scratching. Ben gets me doing "baby scratches" – basic back-and-forth movements. I feel great, but this is only the equivalent of chord-free strumming on a guitar.

Next he gets me to play a sampled voice saying "fresh", then drag the record back, mute the sound with the crossfader, and let the "fresh" sample play again. My rhythm is like a shed door slamming in the wind, but I soon tighten up. Ben tells me what I've picked up in an hour took him months to learn. Visions descend of my 2010 world championship victory. My name is DJ Sauron, and the centres of my records are adorned with a flaming eye.

But there's a reason why Ben took so long to learn: there were no teachers. He endlessly paused and rewound import videos to study the DJs' hands. He probably spent as much time watching them as I did watching "Where Eagles Dare", but with cooler results. My dreams are further dashed when I try rapidly tapping the crossfader on and off to produce "transform scratch", named after the sound of a Transformer transforming. My first attempt sounds like a loser on "Robot Wars".

In due course I head to the Vibe Bar in Brick Lane. I'm nervous. It's one thing getting scratches right in Ben's flat, another doing it in front of a paying crowd. I have visions of being told I suck by aggressive young men. I've tried to dress to blend in – jeans and hooded top. I wanted a baseball cap but the only one to hand was emblazoned with "Genesis – Turn It On Again Tour". That's not a hat, it's a target.

The bar is a converted brewery with graffiti on its bare walls. Panic is setting in: my scratching skills are like my German. Will baby scratches (asking for a room in a *Gasthof*) and transform scratches (enquiring about trains to Dusseldorf) get me through an hour rocking the house (reading Thomas Mann in the original)?

But when I look around, the clientele is all young professionals, the type to ask the manager for a refund, not throw a glass at him. And they're all at the bar, chatting. Where are the pumping hands, the glowsticks? Ben explains that later everyone will be dancing, but right now they're "just chilling". I'm filling what stand-up comics call "the girl slot".

Time to go on – not, for some reason, up on a podium surrounded by adoring figures in tiny bikinis, but in a dark cubbyhole behind the dancefloor. I peer out at the crowd and add baby scratches to Redman's "Funkorama". This seems to go well, in that no one physically pulls me from the decks. So I add some transforms. I'm getting into it. DJ Sauron is storming Gondor.

Ten minutes in, and Ben, Alfred Brendel to my Les Dawson, says he'll take over. Any disappointment is swamped by relief. Not one chilled spectator so much as turned round from their drink. I sounded like someone who knew what they were doing. Maybe I do have hidden talents after all. But don't book that cage-fight just yet. ■

I try "transform scratch". My first attempt sounds like a loser on "Robot Wars"

PHOTOGRAPH DAVID YEO

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